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Cover: "*Gypsies Again*" by Tracy Butler

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February 2006

Jeff, Brendon and I sat down for a meeting a couple weeks ago. By 'sat down' I mean had a conference call, of course. Since it was the beginning of a new year, we felt that we should discuss the future of Deep Magic and see what, if any, changes we wanted to make. The good news is that we plan to continue Deep Magic. Not that it was in doubt or anything. However, several changes and additions were discussed, and over the course of the next few months we hope to roll these out. Most of them aren't earth-shattering or anything, but we hope that they help to focus our efforts and elevate Deep Magic to the next level. One minor change is that I will now be writing all the Editor's Notes. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not...

First and foremost, I would like to announce our January 2006 Special Edition of Deep Magic. Released a few days ago (hence the January date), this issue contains new and completed versions from the writing challenge contest we held last year. Just over 100 pages grace this issue, which, like the contest, is inspired by the art of Tim Kuzniar. The catch? You must be a paid subscriber to access this issue. Now why would we do that, you may ask? It's simple: a major part of expanding Deep Magic (which includes increasing our pay rate and number of stories in each issue) involves increasing our paid subscribers. Adding perks like special editions seems the best way, and we hope this is the first of many perks to come out this year.

Remember the Lamp Post Awards? In case you thought we forgot about them last year, we didn't. In an effort to get the awards on a calendar year, the 2006 awards will cover June 2004 through December 2005. As such, voting is now open. We offer 20 fantasy and 10 science fiction stories from this period to vote on. We'll narrow that vote down to five or so in each category, then have a final vote. Cover Art will also be voted on. I hope that you take the time to vote for your favorite stories from the last year and a half of Deep Magic. Can't access the older issues to refresh your memory on some of the stories? Well, remember those perks I mentioned for subscribing...?

As for this issue, we've managed a bit of a romantic February theme with our stories, so we hope you enjoy them. I'm very pleased with those we chose to publish, and I think you will be, too. Tracy Butler's artwork on the cover sets the mood nicely.

Thank you for reading Deep Magic. As always, we love hearing from our readers. The best place is on our forums. Stop by, register, and chat with the staff and other readers. We're all nice people, really.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Whitted
Chief Editor
Deep Magic

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

The Lamp Post Awards

The first round of voting for the 2006 Lamp Post Awards has begun. On this page is the list of nominees for each category. Go here to vote. The voting page will have links to the issues each story/artwork appears in. The fantasy stories are split into two groups. You can choose up to three stories from each fantasy group (six total), up to three science fiction stories, and up to three pieces of cover art. Drop by the forums if you have any questions.

VOTE HERE

Fantasy Short Story

A Sorcerous Mist by Simon Kewin
Alternate Path by L.S. King
Breath of the Kraken by A. Creg Peters
Call of Blood by Jonathan Ruland
Carrying Souls by M. Thomas
Collection by Steven Richards
Divining Borders by David McGillveray
Gothar's Mountains by Robyn A. Hay
Imoen's Arrow by Robert Shell
Infestation by Ian Creasey
Jodhin by Q.S. Archer
Out of the Dark by Scott Clements
Silent Past by Bill Snodgrass
Stone Games by Keri Stevenson
Sun and Sky by Amy M. Smith
Tale of the Seal by Anne Doucette
The Fall by David Eland
The Golden Needle by Vera Searles
The Ravenmaster by Jeff Wheeler
The Saintly Fianche of Malitane by Amy Butler

SciFi Short Story

Contagion by Keith Robinson
Deletion by Mike Loos
Hunting with Flinteye by Sean T.M. Stiennon
Knitting with Water by Nigel Atkinson
Present Historic by Nyki Blatchley
Soul-Tied Twist by Chris Przybyszewski
The Final Machine by Simon Kewin
The Lost Hemingway by Mark Reeder
Unless a Seed Dies by David Eland
With Eyes Open by Michael P. Dunn

Cover Art

Issue 25 - June 2004
Issue 26 - July 2004
Issue 28 - September 2004
Issue 30 - November 2004
Issue 31 - December 2004
Issue 32 - January 2005
Issue 34 - March 2005
Issue 36 - May 2005
Issue 43 - December 2005

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. All are welcome to participate. We select a small number of submissions each month for publication (we don't offer compensation for challenges).

To submit a challenge, go to our submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. Please note the deadline date.

February 2006 Writing Challenge
Entries due Mar 10, 2006

We all have favorite authors. There is something about that author's "voice" that makes them unique, that draws us into their words, that brings us back to buy their latest work in hardcover when it is released. Your writing challenge for this month is to mimic your favorite author's voice. Do not steal their characters, their setting, or any of their plots. Use their voice to describe a scene. Pick apart the craft of how they make dialogue and describe characters or a scene. But do not write the next epic novel for them. Keep it to 1000 words.

Selections from the December 2005 Challenge

Kotaran Poker
Transitory

The above stories were selected from the December challenge, which was to create a short story about something simple, done in small units of time.

Don't forget the January challenge due Feb 10:

A vow is one of the most compelling and forceful promises one can make, and they make for good motivations in literature. Whether it be a vow of poverty or a vow of revenge, nothing can sway a person from that chosen path. The challenge this month is to present a character who has taken a vow of some sort. Tell us what led that character to take the vow, show us the vow in action, or let us know how it came to be that your character broke his or her vow. Some sample vows to use include: poverty, loyalty, revenge, peace, love, rebellion. Keep your scene or story to 1000 words or less.

Kotaran Poker

By Tshinta Grace

The room smelt smoky—some idiot had placed some green branches on the brazier. It was stifling and felt as if she were stewing in her own sweat.

'Pass,' she grunted, chewing on her stalk of straw in what she hoped was a nonchalant way. She tossed one of her scavenged coins into the bowl. It made a dull chink against the metal coins. Her coin was a *hara'jit*, the lowest of the Fayoren denomination. She passed the centre-hand to the next player and tugged at her confining black robe again.

She felt sweat slide down her face and wiped it away. She stared at the back of his cards. She knew she couldn't lose.

The blue-haired man selected a card from the centre-hand and replaced it with one of the cards he had in his own hand. He tossed a handful of Acaluthan gold coins into the centre bowl and passed the centre-hand onto the man with the two-coloured hair. She stared at the backs of his cards, too, studying the stained glass pattern intently. The shimmering chain around her wrists rattled. There was another rattle as the Reithi dropped a handful of gems into the bowl.

The man with the two-coloured hair selected his card and put one of his own into the centre-hand. He then put down his hand on the rough wooden table, picked up the remainder of the deck, and shuffled the centre-hand back into it. He then passed the deck to her, his light brown eyes glittering malevolently in the brazier's light.

'Deal, slave.'

She resented being called a slave. Her hands tightened around the deck as she struggled to bite back the angry words that came to mind. She would have called him a Dragon-Bitten-Mad-Rogue, would it have done any good.

She shuffled the deck skilfully and dealt out a new centre-hand. She then set the deck down and handed the centre-hand to the Acaluthan man.

She picked up her hand again and took a deep breath of the smoky air. Her robe itched, and she longed to scratch. Instead, she studied her thirteen cards carefully, keeping a watchful eye on the goings-on.

She had the House of Nineteens. She also had the field-card Magic, and the two Magi. She had the Commander, the Ethereal Realm and Ai'Rei Six. She also had two more elemental numbers, the Fifteen of Fire and the Twelve of Air. It was a good hand in Kotaran poker. It totalled three hundred and ninety-seven points in all, and she knew it could be a winning hand. But in this game, she needed more to win.

The silence was broken only by the rattling of her chains as she reached for the centre-hand. Her heart pounded. She could not wait to taste fresh air.

She looked at the six cards that made up the centre-hand, realising painfully that there were three rounds to go, excluding this one. She needed some decent cards.

She rested her elbows on the roughly sawn table, feeling splinters through her thick robe. The cards were all rather low elemental numbers, except for a Great Spirit card. She dismissed it at first, and then went back to it. Great Spirit cards were useless unless you had a world card, a field-card, and a card that related to their ability. And the Great Spirit card was Jeirin, the Magi Spirit. She had a hand that was built around magi. She swapped the Twelve of Air for Jeirin and

passed the centre-hand onto the Acaluthan man, tossing a Kotaran steel coin into the bowl.

She bit down on her stalk of straw hard and spent her time studying the backs of her opponents' cards. This was getting easier all the time.

She curled her toes, feeling hard, cold stone under her feet. She was handed the centre-hand. She looked at it, and again, the cards were mainly elemental numbers. There was only the Necromancer that was remotely useful—and it was a card she could use! After all, the Necromancer was a magi of a kind. Her magi straight was complete. And the game was almost over.

Her heart pounded in joy. She would never have to see this tiny, hateful room again, with its two buckets and its single bed, and its rickety little table.

She put her Fifteen of Fire in the centre-hand and tossed another *hara'jit* into the bowl. She set the centre-hand down, and the three of them spread out their hands on the table. The men counted their hands. The Acaluthi had a point total of seven hundred and twenty four, and the Reithi had six hundred and ninety. Both had straights of five cards as well as a House of Numbers each. She counted her point total, already revelling in her freedom.

'I win,' she said, rattling the chains. 'My score is seven-forty. You can release me now.'

Grumbling, the Acaluthi did so. The multicoloured chains landed on the floor with a thud, and she stood up. The stranglehold on her abilities disappeared. She channelled Fire, guiding it into the slavers' bodies. They burst into unnatural grey flame and died in an instant. Now the room reeked of singed flesh. She gathered her cards and her winnings. She knew she wouldn't lose. After all, they had broken the three rules of gaming.

Keep a straight face—she had acted frightened and fearful, and they had lapped it up, believing her to lose.

Don't bet more than you own—well, they had bet her freedom, and she had already owned that. They had fulfilled their unpaid debts with their lives.

And never use your own cards. She smiled. They had checked her cards for marks, folds and notches, but no one checked the backs of the cards. The stained glass *patterns* were there for a reason, after all.

She kicked the door down and disappeared into the outlaw city. She was the best at Kotaran poker. It had been proven.

Transitory

By A.M. Stickel

"Whoa, Nan. Hold, Dobbin," sang the wagon driver, halting his nags at the gate to Windfall Park. He nodded to his assistant to let down the rear steps.

Several dozers were jarred awake. A small child, who held her nose and pointed at the disheveled codger boarding on unsteady feet, was shushed by her mother. She shoved a sweet in the little one's mouth to appease her.

While placing his two coppers in the wagoner lad's palm with a flourish, the beggar ignored the kerchiefed woman and girl in their wide, colorful skirts. He planted his narrow behind and sack of possessions opposite me, muttering, "Stole my bedroll, they did…nearly caught my death last night."

Reluctant to encourage his camaraderie, I pretended great interest in the account book I was carrying, hoping he would turn his chatter toward one of the young, uncouth bumpkins seated nearer him on the wooden bench.

He continued loudly over the whip crack and creak of wagon wheels, his raspy exhalations a-reek with cheap ale. "I was a Royal Otter—one of His Majesty's finest—decorated seven times, wounded just as often."

I resigned myself to my unwelcome companion, yet did not encourage him with a reply. The other passengers sank lower in their seats, or turned their interest to the passing fallow fields and occasional scraggly stand of trees.

"I'll at least eat today," he said, turning his ragged cap in shaking hands. "My next stop is for bread and cheese with the monks of St. Merten's Abby. On Militia Day, the villagers should have feasted me along with the other heroes, but they made me pay six coppers…curse 'em!"

"I'll have no cursing aboard my wagon," bellowed the driver. "You'll be put off unless you pipe down, Oldster."

The beggar rallied, his sad air transformed to brash, wounded pride. "And I see by that badge sewn on your cape that you were a Royal Marauder, Sir Driver. Can't tell you how many times we Otters had to come in by sea and save your sorry tails."

"We've a ways to go to St. Merten's, Sir Otter the Toothless," threatened the driver, adding, "You may find yourself going the rest of the way by shanks' mare. You're not a-sea anymore, nor can you change back into a youth able to survive on hardtack. You're land-locked the rest of your days."

"You drive so slow I may have already missed my meal," retorted the beggar. "Do any of you worthies have the time?"

No one answered. One garlic-chewing lout pointed to the angle of the sun.

The beggar shook his head in drunken dismay and repeated his question over and over, each time more loudly. Finally, his face beet red, he demanded the time "or else."

My watch, a gift from my late father, sat securely in a hidden pocket of my waistcoat, safe from filthy thieves like this one. He focused his disapproval on me, bringing up his walking stick as if to strike me for my noncompliance.

Then, to my relief, the driver handed his helper the reins and strode to the back of the wagon. He shook a warning finger in the beggar's face. "Your bullying will cause you to be put

off, Oldster. This is your final warning."

The driver returned to his task and the beggar closed his mouth. Soon, though, he looked around at all of us and whined, "I only wanted to know the time. Why do I always get in trouble for asking simple questions?"

We passed over the bridge covering Porter Gulch, and the beggar changed his apology to an admonition. "You don't want to camp under that bridge. They'll beat and rob you, or worse... Only the vilest or most foolish men go there. Tonight I'll sleep for no charge in the graveyard behind St. Merten's. Joining the ghosts on hallowed ground is better than dining with Porter Gulch ghouls."

I tried not to shudder when he spoke of such matters. Twilight was upon us, and the business of my employer weighed heavily on my mind. I needed to keep a clear head, and stop dwelling on why the Count would only meet me at night to discuss his finances and holdings. He had often praised me for my discretion and had promised me eventual wealth. I was bound to him.

By the time we reached St. Merten's Abby, a cold drizzle almost convinced me to seek the hospitality of the monks' hostel for the night rather than transfer to the coach which would take me to the Count's castle. Yet, the very thought of having to endure bread, cheese, and, especially, wine with the former Royal Otter was enough to strengthen my resolve to continue.

The wagon's stairs were lowered for all of us at St. Merten's, with the beggar and I the last to descend. The Count's dark coach was already waiting, and I started towards it. When the codger saw this, he made the sacred warding sign and looked my unimpressive frame up and down, taking in my shabby but neat attire, my large ledger and my worn valise.

His inebriated fog shifted to momentary sharpness and his loud, grating voice to a sly whisper. "Sir Accountant, a transient's company may not be your style, but you've substituted one whom even graveyard ghosts and gully ghouls fear. No, in such company your fate is surely not transitory."

At that moment, I looked up to find the cloudy curtain cleared, revealing the glory of a starry, moonless night. A wolf's mournful howl punctuated the sudden stillness like a plea for moonlight. I had no better reply for the old beggar, who—sensing my resolve—had departed for the Abby anyway. For just a second I almost envied him his poverty-stricken freedom. But then the wolf howled again.

The Triad's Gift

By Aliette de Bodard

The pavilion was deserted. Arune stopped at the entrance to the Hall of Private Audiences, one foot still on the grass of the palace gardens. He tried to still the frantic beating of his heart- in vain. There are some powers that even a hermit gifted by the gods cannot claim to have. Outside, in some infinitely remote part of the world, guards were running through corridors to warn Marek of his arrival. No matter. There was still time.

By moonlight Arune made his way through the fluted sandstone pillars and knelt before the throne at the rear of the room, ignoring the ache that spread through his back. He ran his hand over the white marble of the pedestal, felt the smooth stone give way to the rougher facets of rubies and emeralds inlaid in its surface, and he reminisced about the time when he had ruled the city of Ranesh. When dancers had wheeled beneath the throne and courtiers had played chess with him, and had hung on his every word. A long time ago.

"I have returned," he said. His voice, oddly distorted, came to him from the back of the room.

"So I see."

Arune had been speaking to no one but himself, had sought to convince himself that it was no dream. Surprised, he got up as quickly as he could and turned around. In twelve years of exile he had forgotten how silently Marek could move.

For a while, the two cousins stared at each other. Marek was the first one to break the silence. "So you have returned," he said. "I would like to know how you got past my guards."

Not even kingship, it seemed, had been enough to change his cousin. The stern face with the aquiline nose was still the same which had stared at him over the diceboard—the same which had watched him go into exile without pity. Marek wore princely clothes of silk embroidered with gold, but his tunic was dishevelled.

For a while, the two cousins stared at each other. Marek was the first one to break the silence. "So you have returned," he said. "I would like to know how you got past my guards."

Arune smiled without joy. He ran a hand through his white hair–the mark of a Gifted hermit– and said, "I am no longer without powers. The guards feared my curse and let me pass."

"I see. You are the last person I thought would come to see the gods."

Arune shrugged. His vision of the Triad had come late one night as he was tossing and turning in the grip of nightmares. And he had woken up with the knowledge of the gods, and a body prematurely aged: white hair, bent back and a heart that could no longer sustain prolonged efforts. Such was the price for being Gifted by the gods.

"Your place is no longer here," Marek said.

"I have every right to be here. Twelve years have passed since you defeated me at dice, and the time you set for my exile has ended," Arune said.

"And you come for another game? You know I will never grant you that. A Gifted hermit will best me at any kind of game, whether it be riddles, chess or dice."

continued on page 19

Featured Artist
Tracy Butler

Age: 25
Residence: St. Louis, Missouri.
Marital Status: single
Children: none
Hobbies: Painting, drawing, writing, 3D modeling and animation
Personal Quote: "There is one thing one has to have: either a soul that is cheerful by nature, or a soul made cheerful by work, love, art, and knowledge." — Friedrich Nietzsche
Favorite Book or Author: Mervyn Peake, Fyodor Dostoyevsky
Started Painting In: I began years ago with colored pencils in perhaps 1988 or 1989, and began painting more seriously with watercolor and digital media around 1997.
Artist Most Inspired By: I've a long list of inspirations, but to be concise: J.W. Waterhouse, John Everett Millais and Alan Lee.
Media You Work In: Watercolor, gouache, digital, 3D
Schools Attended: I studied biology briefly at Our Lady of the Elms College
Other Training: I learned a great deal from a mentor I had during my childhood and into my adolescence, but I've not had any formal training in art.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed:
- Cover and interior illustrations for the Ironclaw RPG book and for the Rinaldi Ironclaw expansion book, both published by Sanguine, Ltd.
- Cover and interior illustrations for the children's book *Tooth Fairy Palace* by Randy Naughton.
- Interior artwork for the novel *Rover's Cripple* by Adele Lorienne.
- Interior technical illustration for the recent publication of *GPU Gems 2.*
- Painting included in *The New Masters of Fantasy 2004* released by Epilogue.
- Web site graphics and artwork for Play.net (Simutronics Corporation web site).
- Artwork featured at the Hero's Journey (www.herosjourney.net) development web site.

Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: I can be contacted at tracy@foxprints.com about all things art-related. Needlepoint charts of my artwork can be purchased from Heaven and Earth Designs (www.heavenandearthdesigns.com) and color prints of my paintings can be ordered from my web site.
Website URL: www.foxprints.com

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Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I don't think I developed into an artist in any sort of progressive sense. Certainly my motor skills, technique, and artistic sensibilities have developed with time, but I seem to have always had an inherent inclination to communicate with pictures. It's one of those fundamental aspects of the person I am, as much as my personality is.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: My work, I think, is an understated sort of fantasy. I can't really use 'fantastic' in the more traditional sense of the word—I seldom incorporate elves, dragons or other supernatural elements generally considered staples of the genre into my personal artwork. Instead, I tend to rely on the idyllic to render a fantasy. History seems to acquire a sort of grandeur with time that transforms it into legend. It's that kind of character—something a bit misty with age, akin to reality but offset by romanticism—that I try to capture in my work.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: I find I'm very drawn to old things. It's hard to observe something tarnished by time without imagining it as it might have existed in fresher form, and without wondering what story lies in the accumulated patina. For this reason, when I'm in need of inspiration, I often turn to photographs of ancient, ruined edifices, I read books about history, I listen to old folk music, I visit antique shops and study old paintings. I even find much of the same aspect in the ivy growing over the chipping paint of my weathered wooden porch. These reminders of the past have a tendency to set my mind wandering, and when it comes to creating artwork, wandering is an excellent state of mind.

Q: What inspired this piece (our cover art)? Tell us its story...
A: For a long time I've had a number of characters in development and a story to go along with them. "Gypsies Again" is an illustrated bit of this story, which involves a pair of characters lifting themselves out of their respective situations and moving on. As I was working on the picture, there was something of a parallel theme in my own life that made it all the more relevant to me and perhaps even a little cathartic. It's a picture of transition, or those points that come along in life when you've got to uproot yourself from comfort and complacency, and with one last repining glance over your shoulder, move onward.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: The driven, energetic, creative people I am fortunate to be surrounded by have greatly influenced me. It's a challenge to keep pace with them—artist and entrepreneur alike. Likewise, the work ethic and the perfectionist leanings of my parents have undeniably left an impression. My exposure in school to biology and anatomy has helped refine my art and has motivated me

continued on next page

to seek out a scientific understanding of the world. These rather pragmatic influences are joined with bits of the realm of the ideal as well: the histories of the different US cities I've been visiting and the love and appreciation of homeland that has resulted, the Irish poets who write of those same emotions, the Pre-Raphaelite philosophies, and, of course, all those cartoons I watched as a kid. In one way or another, all of these things have had an enduring impact on how I approach my artwork.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: One of the most gratifying things in life is to earn a living doing what you most enjoy, and so I'd have to say I think my greatest success has been finding a way to do just that. I go to work every morning to invent, draw and animate characters and creatures, to conceptualize fantasy cities and to mingle my ideas with those of the other artists and creative minds involved. Being able to exercise my passions in my day-to-day work has been, after years of effort to become an artist at a professional level, the best payoff I could have hoped for.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: Trendy subject matters, styles and media are so multitudinous and so much in flux, it's almost hard to name them before they've come and gone. I think it is worth noting, however, that fantasy in the broadest sense seems to be experiencing a sort of mass popularization as of late. With bookstores filling entire sections with graphic novels and anime, Tolkien and C.S. Lewis in the box office, and the rapidly growing market for online fantasy RPGs like World of Warcraft, a genre that once appealed to groups with more esoteric tastes (we being a genus more commonly known as geeks), has gone thoroughly mainstream. Artistically speaking, it will be very interesting to see what new things arise from this burgeoning popularity.

Afternoon Download

By Calie Voorhis

Rich sunlight glinted off the deep, blue water below her, small white-masted sailing boats dotting the expanse as she basked on the cliff-side patio. Data from the sun beat down on her body, warming receivers on her spine as she relaxed, face forward in the donut hole of the massage chair. Strong hands carefully avoided the sensitive fins on her spine, rubbing away knots under her shoulder blades. What a beautiful place this was, she thought. It lived up to all the media hype it had as the premier World Coalition resort.

The world news data feed sifted in with the sunshine on her nails and fins. A calm day, same as every day. A famous starlet was pregnant with twins, clones of both her and her much more famous husband, and a new blockbuster hit on the way.

The world news data feed sifted in with the sunshine on her nails and fins. A calm day, same as every day.

She switched to the Hunter section, fins allowing her privileged access. Not much happening here. Two 'pires dead after resisting arrest, the only news. Why do they do it? she wondered. Why resist the data streaming out of the air? Why cut yourself off from the bliss provided by the sun all in the name of nebulous freedom? The world was a happy and healthy place these days, everyone united by the same quality of information. All you had to do was relax and enjoy. But the 'pires chose to live in the dark, to crawl through the night, to cripple themselves, and cut off the world feed.

Downloading the news took all of two minutes. After a final caress, the masseur walked away to start on the man beside Mignon. She rolled over on her stomach to make sure her tan would even up, letting the nodules implanted in her nails absorb data in case anything exciting happened. As if it would.

She needed to face reality. She was bored out of her mind, rest and relaxation antithetical to her persona. After two weeks she'd tried everything the island had to offer. Sailing. Surf-kiting. Multiple volleyball games left scabs on her knees. She'd tried to make friends, went on three half-hearted dates with appropriate fellow agents who, although beautiful to look at and physically exactly her type, had glutted her to tears with shoptalk. The only thing left was the ruined temple, which up until now she'd delayed visiting.

Out of desperation she'd even cleaned out her memory theatre, the virtual repository of her files, discarding scraps of images and memories long accumulating dust and eating up space. But there were still two more long weeks of mandatory vacation to endure before she could return to work at the agency.

She sat up and stretched languorously. Perhaps she'd take a walk today, fix a picnic and pack up some of the cold, tart, white wine the island was famous for, go to the ruins at the top of the mountain and bask in the data there. The site attracted and repelled her for some reason. It reminded her of something Mignon couldn't quite remember. A feeling she should be doing something nagged at her.

She stood up as she decided definitively to go to the ruins and view her favorite soap

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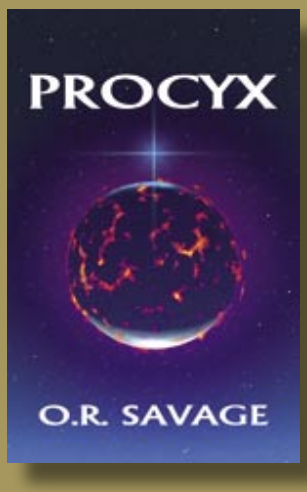

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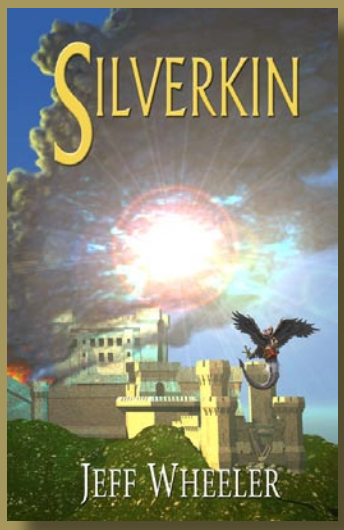

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AMBERLIN BOOKS

Rainfall
By Michael Merriam

The rain missed her.

Robert had noticed an oddness about her before, but the whole 'she-is-dry-while-everything-else-is-soaked' thing settled the matter.

Robert had written her off as a little strange the previous Tuesday. She had plopped down next to him on the bus stop bench wearing a thin, black T-shirt, jeans, and sandals. Everyone else, himself included, was bundled up in coats and scarves against the chill continuing to hang on into early spring. Robert started to ask her if she was cold when the number four bus roared up to the curb. They both climbed aboard, her vanishing toward the back while he took his customary seat up front with the gimps. He didn't notice where she got off, but when Robert stood to exit the bus, he was the only person on board.

She sat down next to him again the following Thursday. She still seemed unconcerned about the damp chill, but what caught Robert's attention this time was the way her skin and her short purple hair appeared to glow and sparkle faintly. Robert realized he was staring when she turned toward him and hit him with a smile. He smiled shyly back at her, acknowledging his transgression, and turned his eyes across the street.

She still seemed unconcerned about the damp chill, but what caught Robert's attention this time was the way her skin and her short purple hair appeared to glow and sparkle faintly.

He felt her body posture change, and he sensed her about to say something when the bus turned the corner and pulled up to the curb. This time Robert managed to situate himself in the front bench so he could see the whole inside of the bus. He set his twin canes across his legs and surreptitiously kept one eye on her. When the driver called out Thirty-Third Street, she pulled the cord and stepped up to the back door. She turned toward Robert and nodded before exiting. Robert followed her with his eyes, her purple hair making her easy to spot, until she stepped into the coffee shop on the corner.

Today it was the rain. She sat on the bench, bone dry while everyone else ended up drenched. It proved too much for Robert to ignore.

"You're supposed to be wet, you know," Robert said.

She looked at him in horror. "I am not?"

"Nope," Robert shook his head.

She closed her eyes and seemed to concentrate for a moment. Robert watched as the raindrops continued to fall around but not *on* her. The air shimmered in Robert's vision for an instant, but otherwise she remained unchanged. She opened her eyes and looked at him. "Am I wet now?"

"No."

She scooted closer to him. "Would you mind sharing your umbrella?"

"Why?" he wanted to know. "It's not like you're getting rained on."

"But I am supposed to be. It would assist the illusion if I could share your umbrella." She

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Science Fiction

The Children of the Company
By Kage Baker

When it comes to time travel stories, it's hard to come up with a new twist. To make matters more difficult, modern physicists don't agree whether time travel is even theoretically possible. One common quip is that we are all time travelers, moving through time in the same direction and at the same pace.

It is this idea that Kage Baker has taken and exploited in her Company series of books, of which *The Children of the Company* is the seventh installment. In this world, time travel is possible, but incredibly expensive and not too practical, so Dr. Zeus, a cabal from the twenty-fourth century (the 'Company' of the series title), creates a race of cyborg servants back at the dawn of time to secure for it numerous treasures that have mysteriously 'disappeared' from the historical record. There is a problem, however, in that the cyborgs cannot change recorded history and so must exist and act in the shadows of what is known.

Over time, though, these immortal servants of the Company begin to get bored, and so some start to conspire to overthrow Dr. Zeus.

Added into this mix is that no one knows what happens after the year 2355. The Company has provided their cyborg agents with a temporal concordance that gives the major events of history, but it ends at 2355, and no one knows what happens to the cyborgs after that.

The overall series' plot is much more complex than this, having spanned seven books so far. The latest installment, *The Children of the Company*, is a fix-up of six previously published short stories. Usually, I hesitate to buy such fix-ups if I already have the short stories, but because the stories were published out of order and over the span of a decade, it was refreshing to re-read these stories to pick up on a lot of details that were always there but not apparent until set next to the other stories.

The framing sequence for these stories is the tale of one of the evil cyborgs, Executive Facilitator General Labienus, whom we have met previously in the series and whom we know is wicked in his intentions. By bringing these stories together in this way, however, Kage Baker plunges Labienus to even more evil depths as we see him systematically ruin one cyborg's life after another. Remember, though, that this is more than just a few years of misery: the cyborgs are immortal, and Labienus spares no one in his quest for power, so those he harms are harmed for the rest of time…or until 2355.

As with all of Kage Baker's Company stories, there is wry humor as well as incredibly poignant and touching pathos. But most compelling of all are the cyborgs themselves, who are quite human in their motivations and desires. The main characters of Facilitator Joseph and Botanist Mendoza are not present in this book, although Literature Preservationist Lewis is present in the early stories. Still, we get to see the gentle Russian Kalugin and his grisly fate, as well as follow Facilitator Victor as he experiences turmoil within his soul, torn between serving Labienus and doing what is right.

Although *The Children of the Company* does not move the plot forward from the previous novel (*The Life of the World to Come*), this is anything but a gentle respite before the series finale; instead, what we have is a portrait of a gruesome villain who is all the more dastardly because he has all eternity to make his plans.

Possible objectionable material: There are some mild sexual references, as well as a visit to a red-light district.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued on next page

Book Review: Science Fiction

Newton's Wake: A Space Opera

By Ken MacLeod

For all the Eurydiceans knew, they were the last remnant of humanity. Having fled an Earth devastated in a war against machines that had upgraded themselves to consciousness and uploaded into themselves millions of humans connected to the internet, the refugees settled down on a pristine planet to enjoy their extended lifespans and their cornucopia machines without looking back. Meanwhile the posthuman AIs disappeared, leaving enigmatic artifacts littered across the galaxy, and leaving the survivors to dig themselves out of the ashes.

Eurydice's isolation ends when Lucinda Carlyle, a junior member of the clan that controls the wormhole "skein," stumbles across it on an exploratory mission. Restoration of contact not only threatens to spark a showdown between the Carlyles—whose wormhole monopoly is jeopardized if they lose control of any one—and the other powers, but also revives the debate between Eurydice's Runner faction, still in charge, and its Returners, whose dream of going back to Earth and rescuing the minds uploaded into the AIs and possibly still trapped in the posthuman relics is now within reach.

Ken MacLeod, in *Newton's Wake,* sketches out the predicaments of several characters: Lucinda's status in her family plunges when her mission tilts them toward financial disaster; an asteroid miner's ship is hijacked by an AI which sets to building war machines; a Eurydicean producer of spectacles (his studio is cluttered with "a foliage-camouflaged armoured car from *Macbeth*, the balcony and antiaircraft gun from *Romeo and Juliet*, the fallout shelter from *West Side Story*") resurrects two pop musicians to help redefine the Eurydicean founding myth. For the first couple hundred pages, the story cruises on the continual introduction of new people, new planets, and new situations. MacLeod sets up death-defying stunts and political conspiracy; he carries his heroine from a ball with Eurydice's fashionable elite to a biologist's abode inside a statue of Marx.

Unfortunately, novelty suffices to enliven a story for only so long. The virtuoso beginning needs to launch into a meaty middle, but events move forward without building momentum, without linking up or falling gracefully into place. If *Newton's Wake* ultimately does not work, perhaps the fact that it doesn't follow the right map and push the expected buttons is the central flaw.

But I also felt that the reader is held at arm's length from the story and from the characters, mainly because most of what we learn about either is from listening in on what characters say to one another. Anything without immediate bearing on the present is neglected. Consequently, the plot can be hard to follow, and the reader only knows the characters like casual acquaintances.

Or maybe, at root, what drags the book down is that MacLeod tries to pull it in two directions—he tries to tell a story on a grand scale but only through the eyes of people on its edges. Finally, when the big story is tied up, the characters, understanding some things better, pair off, and the resolution is not unsatisfying. I just found it hard to keep reading to that point.

Possible objectionable content: Graphic violence and lots of cursing.

(Reviewed by Ida Clinkscales)

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"I come for my revenge, and for the kingdom you stole from me."

"I stole nothing," Marek said. "Twelve years ago, I won the game of dice, and I won it fairly."

"You won nothing."

Marek was gazing at him with expressionless eyes. "Whatever I say will not send you away."

"No, cousin," Arune said softly. He crossed his arms over his chest, and for the first time since he had entered the palace, he felt the power the gods had granted him rise in him, blossoming within the confines of his chest like a huge lotus flower. "I could raze this palace with a word."

"But it would not be just in the eyes of the Triad." Marek sounded vaguely amused. "You know you would lose your powers forever if you did that. And tell me, of what use would rubble be to you? Of what use the throne shattered to a thousand pieces?"

Arune said nothing for a while. Only one thing remained alive in him, the urge that had driven him out of the forest: he needed to play one more game with Marek and regain his kingdom. To win, so that he could prove to himself that his twelve years in exile had not been spent in vain, that he was no longer a man whom the tumble of dice can strip of his possessions and send into the forest. When he had started the long journey that had led him out of the forest, and into the city of his youth, he had not envisioned what would happen if Marek should refuse his challenge. He had been beyond reasoning.

"Then we seem to have reached an impasse." Marek closed his eyes for a moment, and his lips moved without sound. At last he said, staring at Arune, "There might be a way."

"For what?"

"For me to give you what you want."

"Why should you? I am your bitter enemy."

Marek shook his head. "Be patient," he said, slightly amused. He seemed to be rebuking Arune, as he had so often done in the days before the dice game. "It is a long story, and one better discussed in proper surroundings."

Arune did not move from before the throne. "Why should I trust you?"

"You have nothing to lose," Marek said. "And I have never broken my word to you."

After thinking for a while, Arune said, "I will listen, at least, to your tale. But I make no guarantees."

"It is enough for me. Come, cousin."

* * *

They retired into Marek's private chambers–which had been Arune's, once. The white marble walls, inlaid with coloured stone flowers, were unchanged; so were the latticed windows, through which came nothing but darkness, and the suffocating air from outside.

They sat cross-legged between two of these windows, on a woven mat. Two bowls of cardamom tea had been laid on the mat, along with flatbread and various sweetmeats. Arune raised the bowl to his lips. Spicy liquid ran down his throat, a relief after the time he had spent outside in the parched atmosphere.

Kanti, Marek's wife, came in unobtrusively, and sat behind her husband. She had once been Arune's bride, and something of what he had felt for her made a shiver run up his spine as he gazed upon her.

"So?" he asked, to Marek. "What do you want to discuss?"

The other did not reply for a while. Kanti was staring straight at him, with an intensity that he found disturbing. It was she who spoke next.

"Why have you brought him here?"

"You know," Marek said.

"Then tell him," Kanti said.

Arune was starting to feel ill at ease, although he would have been hard-pressed to explain why. "Tell me what?"

"That you have already had your revenge," Marek said. His voice was quiet, but not without bitterness.

"The drought? Is that my revenge?" Arune was thinking of the stricken cities that he had passed through on his way to the palace. He raised the bowl to his mouth, wondered why he felt so detached from things. He had dreamt for years of what he would do once he reached again the palace he had lost, and now he was sitting in front of his enemy, and speaking civilly with him. Twelve years in the forest did that to a man: deadened everything so that, coming back, he found nothing that he could cling to.

"The drought came afterwards," Kanti said. Her husband jerked as if stung by a scorpion. Something was wrong with her voice, Arune thought, trying to go beyond his mortal senses. But Kanti spoke in soft, lilting tones, every word radiating respect both for their guest and for her husband. *No. I do not listen. I hear only what I want to hear.* But he was far away from the forest in which his powers took root, and the gods in his heart were silent.

"The drought came after what?" Arune asked, at last.

"After the curse," Kanti said, smiling without joy. Marek reached out as if to silence her, but she recoiled in a fluid gesture, leaving him grasping at empty air.

Marek sighed. "In the fifth year after you were gone, a hermit came to Ranesh, to challenge me to a riddle game."

"And you refused?"

"I wanted to keep my kingdom," Marek said, with a touch of impatience. "And it was within my right to refuse. He took it very courteously. I gave him the three nights' hospitality, as the gods require, and saw him on his way.

"But a soldier with a surfeit of loyalty thought the old man was still a danger to me. He waited for him to exit the walls of the palace and stabbed him in the back. The hermit's dying words were to curse me." His face was bleak. "And now we come to this."

"To what?" Arune said, but he was looking at Kanti.

Marek did not answer. His mouth was set as if to prevent words from escaping him.

"You no longer have the power to protect me, husband," Kanti said, mockingly. "And even if you had not brought him here to help me, he has a right to know." She rose. Marek tried to cling to her, but she twisted out of his hands. "It was his kingdom. He has the right to know why the wells in every city of the South have run dry, and why the earth of the fields is parched."

She stood for a while, towering over both of them. And then, bitterly proud of what she was doing, she slowly began withdrawing the silver pins that had been holding her hair together.

"I have not the power of the forest," Marek said. "I am only a small-time sorcerer, a dabbler in things that should not concern me. The nagas in the lake frighten me, and the apsaras from heaven never descend into my kingdom, for which I am grateful. But I did manage a small illusion for her." The discarded pins clinked, one by one, on the stone floor.

And Kanti changed. Gradually, as each pin lost contact with her hair, every trace of

humanity was stripped from her. Until at last she stood before them, her true appearance manifest. Arune could not help shivering.

Her skin, mottled with grey, rippled in the light, and her legs, coiled on the floor, had started fusing together. Scales had invaded her whole body; her head was surrounded with a hood on which a hundred jewels caught the light of the lamps. Only the eyes were human, still watching him, but there was in them the shadow of something beyond mortal comprehension.

"She is a naga," Arune whispered, fighting his urge to take a step backwards. "This is what he did?"

"The metamorphosis is not yet complete," Marek said. He suddenly seemed to have aged thirty years. "But the nagas of the lake see her as their own. They want me to relinquish her. The drought is their doing, to force me into letting her go."

"And you do not want to?" Arune said, feeling a perverse joy to see Marek despair, to know that the other was paying, in a way, for the years Arune had spent on the brink of madness in the forest.

"I love her," Marek said. "I would do anything to take away that curse." He looked at Arune for a while, and said, "This is the bargain I offer you. You are a Gifted hermit. You speak the language of the rivers and of the lake. Will you not plead with the nagas?"

Arune, taken aback by all he had witnessed, did not speak, for fear that a word would utterly change the world around him. Kanti had not moved. Her eyes seemed to be staring at something beyond both of them.

"I will give you whatever you want," Marek said.

"You know what I want. Are you ready to pay that price?"

"My kingdom?" Marek laughed. "Yes, if that is what you ask."

Arune shook his head. "I do not ask for you to give me back my kingdom. I want to play dice with you once more."

"You would win in any case."

"But it would not have the same significance." Arune could not tear his gaze from Kanti. "I had not imagined things would go that way," he said, at last.

Marek smiled without joy. "What would you have had? A battle between us? It only happens in poems, Arune. And I have no hatred for you."

"You exiled me."

"Because I thought you unfit to rule. Because a king cannot have fits of temper or caprices."

"I have come back. I am fit to rule," Arune said softly. "I have learnt wisdom at the feet of the gods, and now I claim my due." He looked at Kanti. "But if that is the only way to get what I want, I shall plead in your name."

"And in return," Marek said, not a muscle of his face moving, "I will give you what you want: we shall play dice once more."

Arune nodded, feeling the weight of what he had agreed to do settle across his shoulders, bending his back even further than age.

* * *

At dawn Arune stood before the lake. Just behind him rose the sandstone mass of the palace, from the windows of which Marek would be watching him; before him, still water that no wind would stir, water that seemed to be absorbing the grey light, barely reflecting his image.

He waited, leaning on his staff. His heart was hammering against his ribs. *I am no longer young,* he thought–for although he was thirty years, his hair was white, and his body that of a far older man—and he wished that the Triad had not seen fit to grant him its wisdom, for it was a bittersweet gift to receive.

"I would speak with you," he said to the still surface before him.

The lake exhaled. Water rose in a fountain in front of him, and when they subsided, two nagas stood, watching him with unblinking eyes. They looked like brothers, if brotherhood had any meaning in the world of the nagas, with identical human faces under cobra hoods, and identical patterns of scales on their coiled lower halves.

The smell which came after the rain flooded Arune's nostrils. "We listen," the nagas said, and their voice was the waves lapping at the shore. Each of them had four arms, which writhed in the air like maddened snakes.

"You know why I am here," Arune said.

"Yes." It was a mere hiss.

"Can you not lift the curse?"

"Why should we?"

"It is not fair."

"What do we care about fairness? She is ours; that is all that matters. Already her thoughts move in our world. Would you keep her penned within mortal walls? She does not belong in that world anymore. At night she dreams of the lake, and of our palaces below the surface. She sees humankind as we do; she could make a source flow with a word."

"And break the drought?" Arune asked.

A hiss, which could have been an intake of breath. "The Lake Kin is arrayed against the breaking of the drought. She has not the strength to defy us. And neither have you. Leave, hermit, and do not concern yourself with the affairs of this world. You would only serve the selfishness of her husband, who refuses to acknowledge that she is no longer his. Whereas we...we are her kin, and would care for her as if she had been born among us."

"And you do all of this," Arune asked, "for one human?"

"Not a human. No longer, hermit. She is a naga, and kin never abandons kin. She is ours. Do not try to defy us."

"I am not without powers," Arune said.

They laughed. "No. But they pale in comparison to what we were born with."

Arune said, softly, "You may never age, but you can be killed. You can be weakened."

"You dare threaten us? The eldest among us, hermit, was born when man was still a thought in the minds of the Triad. You are nothing. You command nothing."

Arune remembered the madness that had seized him in the forest, the knife's edge on which he had danced, never knowing what was illusion and what was true. He remembered the one, burning thought in his mind: that one day he would humble Marek as he had been humbled himself. He needed to have revenge. "I promised Marek that I would find a way to break the curse. I will ask the Triad, then."

The nagas did not move. Their faces remained impassive, but the air quivered with their anger. "You will not bring the gods into this."

"I have no choice," he said, truthfully.

He heard them laugh, then. It had the sound of waterfalls crashing into pools, of rain striking roofs, of waves breaking on shores. "You always have a choice, mortal. But then we will play a game with you, Arune, you who are so determined to play games.

"We cannot remove the curse, for we were not the ones who cast it. But there is a way the metamorphosis can be reversed. If you find it, and if you can undo the curse before the next dark of the moon, we will lift the drought from the cities of the South.

"But should you fail, you will prevail upon her husband to release her, and she will be ours until the world comes to an end. And the monsoon will come in any case. See, we are fair, mortal." They laughed again, and he felt the inhuman force behind that laughter, a force which shook his whole frame, and sent him to his knees, clinging to his useless staff with shaking hands.

He managed to rise, every joint in his body protesting against the movement. His throat had gone dry. They had to be very sure that he would fail, then, if they proposed this to him. But then to them it was all a game; human lives meant nothing, and in the end, what mattered save seeing mortals struggle for something they could not have? It only increased their sense of superiority.

"I accept," he said, his voice still shaking.

* * *

After reporting to Marek what had transpired, Arune made his way into the gardens of the palace. He deliberately kept his back to the huge sandstone archway which marked the limit of the palace grounds. For he knew that if he turned he would see the path that meandered through the reeds and soon led to the uncannily still waters of the lake. The lake, which was now watching him. Hoping he would fail.

A wind which bore no promise of the monsoon blew through the gardens, but he had endured worse in the forest, and walked through it, heedless of the way it tore at his skin.

He reached at last an isolated clearing with a well at its centre. Arune smiled inwardly. He had known there would be at least one somewhere within the walls, for the lake could not provide drinking water for the palace.

He knelt by the side of the well, peered into it. The rim was dry, and hot to the touch, but he thought he could see a glimmer of water at the very bottom, hidden within shadows. He rose, in spite of the ache in his back, and took a step backwards.

Then he spoke a word of power to the well, and waited. The ground rumbled. The light around him shivered for a moment, and the stones pulsed with hidden life.

"You dare disturb me?"

Arune felt a small satisfaction to know he had been right.

"I was Gifted by the Triad," he said.

Bitter laughter came from the well. "Were you?"

"Show yourself," Arune commanded. "In the name of the Triad, and of the primal ocean, I order you to–"

More amused laughter. "You know it does not work that way, hermit. Power the gods gave you over the demons and the apsaras from heaven, and over the folk of the forest. But over my kind, none. After all, it was one of ours who slept on the primal ocean."

"And almost poisoned all of creation."

"There is that, yes."

"If I cannot order you...Will you show yourself, then? Please?"

A rustle like dry leaves came from the well. The wind became cold. And Arune had the sense of something immense approaching. He clung to his staff, even though his power lay in the

mantras the gods had taught him, and not in anything so material as a piece of wood.

The hood rose first, shining with broken jewels. And then the two red, glowing eyes, and after that the head, and the neck, unfolding lazily, until a huge cobra reared before him, poison dripping from its fangs. Arune wondered why the naga of the well had chosen that shape, rather than the half-human, half-snake one that most nagas preferred.

"Hermit," the cobra said. It looked in bad health; patches of skin sloughed off as it moved. "What do you want?"

"To end the drought," Arune said. "The Lake Kin are killing you as surely as they are killing the folk of the cities. When this well runs dry, where will you go?"

The cobra's head swayed, focused on him. The unblinking red eyes held him. He fought an urge to abase himself before the other, repeating, over and over, the words of a prayer to the Creator.

"Where nagas go," the cobra answered at last.

"Water sustains you, like it does every naga," Arune said. "You have power over it. But there is almost no water left here."

"I heard you strike your bargain. It was well done, but they know you cannot win."

"I have until the next dark of the moon."

"You will fail." The cobra sounded amused.

"Will you not help me?" Arune asked at last. He was tired of fencing with the other, of losing time.

"Help you?" The cobra reared.

"They betrayed you. They are killing you."

The cobra did not move for a while. It said nothing. At last it laughed. "What difference will it make, in the end, hermit, whether you win or you lose? Very well. If you were to bring her the liquor of the gods before the dark of the moon, it would cure her, and you would have met the terms of the challenge. But you know as well as I do that no mortal may climb the branches of the tree that leads into heaven."

The tree of heaven at the heart of the forest. Arune almost sank to his knees. He had come from there, and now he had to go back. A long journey. It could be made in time, yes, but he had the body of an old man, and the prospect of this disheartened him.

"I cannot," he whispered, and the cobra heard him.

"I thought so," it said, with satisfaction. "They will enjoy watching you lose, hermit." And it sank back into the well. All that remained were patches of dry skin that the wind caught and played with, within the deserted, desiccated gardens of the palace.

* * *

Kanti sent for him before he left. He met her in her chambers, away from the domineering presence of her husband. By the window, if he strained his eyes, he could imagine the lake in the distance. Arune wondered whether the orientation of the room had been intentional.

"I have often dreamt that you would be coming back," she said. She had her back to him; he could not see her eyes.

"And how did you see me? As a rescuer?" It was hard to summon the sarcasm necessary for such a biting remark, although he longed to wound her. All the same, he saw her flinch.

At length she turned to him. The bland, illusory face Marek had created for her was still in the grey light of dawn. "Not as you are now," she said, pushing the palm of one hand against

the other. "You have changed. The Arune I knew would never have become a hermit." There was a quiet wonder in her voice, a distance that made him feel ill at ease. Did they feel nothing more for each other?

"Yes," he said. "I have changed. My cousin challenged me to a game of dice. I lost everything I possessed to him, and the last thing I saw before I was driven into the forest for twelve years was my fiancée, standing hand in hand with him, watching me depart without a word."

Kanti was silent for a while. Something, the shadow of an emotion, moved behind her perfect irises. "It is far too late for apologies. So I will not try. You should remember, though, that I was gambled away as one of your possessions. Such is the role of a wife; she comes with the kingdom, and not with the ruler." Her voice was toneless, as uninflected as the hiss of a snake.

Arune thought about what she had said. Outside, the sun had risen, and its light filled the room with delicate shadows of color. "It is also far too late for an exchange of recriminations. So let us be at peace, my lady." But there was still the old wound, unhealed, the memory that would not go away, the betrayal of his love. Still it writhed in his chest. He quelled it; the time for it was past.

"There is nothing left for us, Arune."

"No. Twelve years have passed over our promises to each other, and we have both broken our word. Was he a good husband?"

She smiled. The mouth curled upwards, but the rest of her face did not move. It made for an unsettling effect. "What answer do you want, Arune? That he was cruel and that I regretted your departure?"

He said nothing. No answer had been called for. Beneath the illusion of humanity, her eyes had filled with the shifting colours of mother-of-pearl, of algae, of light on fish-scales. He saw the waters of the lake in her pupils, reaching out to him and dragging him down into its unfathomable depths.

"He was a decent man. For a mortal," Kanti said.

Frightened, hovering over the gulf in her gaze, he managed a whisper, "Kanti."

"He desired me, Arune. Can you understand that, you who have shed the world? It was not the kingdom he wanted, in the end–although he judged you unworthy of ruling it. It was me. Something he could not have. With flesh and bone and sinew he longed, like all his kind, for something he could treasure forever."

"He had you."

"For a time. Now he grows old and frightened of what I am. And I long to return to the lake."

"You were never in the lake," Arune said. The feeling of fear was crushing his ribs.

"Was I?" she asked. Kanti's eyes turned to a human green for a second, and clouded again. "I no longer remember."

"I cannot remember for you."

"Nobody can."

"I remember a girl who liked to wear flowers in her hair, and who ran in the gardens of the palace."

"She is dead," Kanti said. "She went the way of all mortal things. In the end, only the lake will remain."

"You frighten me."

"I frighten everyone." She laughed, as the nagas in the lake had laughed, and he heard

in her voice the roar of waves in a stormy sea. "Do you see? You claim to be wise, wise enough to rule this kingdom. You have seen the gods. But, in the end, you remain human, afraid of anything that is beyond your understanding."

"It is not that."

She laughed again. "Then tell me what frightens you."

I cannot, he thought, chilled to the core of his being. *You would no longer understand. Nothing changes in the lake; nothing ever dies, unless it is weakened and killed by magic. And you have begun to be like them. Soon the very idea of change will be alien to you, something told in human words that no longer mean anything.*

And I–I have seen my tormentor turn into a wise ruler, and the woman I loved is becoming a naga. Is there nothing I can cling to anymore?

"I will bring you the liquor," he said, to put an end to the conversation.

Kanti's face held, as always, no expression. She said, in an accented voice that almost sounded human, "They will try to stop you by any way they can think of. Beware, Arune, beware." She paused, and added, "May the Triad walk before you."

"And may its shadow cover you," he said, bowing and taking his leave from her. The one thought he didn't utter would not leave his mind.

You need the gods' protection far more than I do.

* * *

He left the palace soon after that, in the wan light of the morning, with nothing but his staff and the clothes on his back. Both Marek and Kanti stood above the gateway and watched him go. As soon as he had crossed the town of Ranesh, he turned, and looked at the palace wavering in the light of the rising sun for a long time. He remembered the last time he had done this: he had been young still, untouched by the gods, and filled with bitterness at having lost to Marek. He had ranted at his own foolishness, which had caused him to accept the game of dice, and then to accept the growing stakes until he had gambled away to his cousin everything that he owned: his bride, and then his kingdom.

It did not go the way I had planned, he thought. He had no liking for Marek still and was glad to see the other shaken out of his complacency, but he wanted to regain his kingdom, so he had become embroiled in the other's affairs. And then there was Kanti. There had always been Kanti. No. She no longer mattered; she had betrayed him.

He walked through the same cities he had walked through on his way to Ranesh, and saw the same things: the dry wells, the parched earth, the shutters closed not only against the heat but against death. The mothers holding babies to withered breasts, the men working listlessly in the fields.

It ought to have meant something to him. It had been his kingdom, and his people, and slowly they were dying. But somehow they seemed to be far away from him, in another land, with other concerns than his own. He no longer cared. About anything or anyone. It was a harsh, unpleasant thing to discover: that the price to pay for the powers of the gods was detachment, that the only way the Triad could entrust such magic to a man was to ensure at the same time that he would no longer care enough to use it in the mortal world.

I care, he thought. But only the game of dice had any significance, a remnant of the burning desire for revenge that had kept him from madness in the forest.

He moved on, leaning on his staff, leaving the towns behind him.

Gradually his sense of the mortal world diminished, and the trees of the forest loomed ever closer. Until one day he found himself walking under the canopy, in the familiar green light, on paths no mortal men might have found. The air here was moist, a far cry from the dry cities. And he felt at home and at ease for the first time since he had set out from the forest.

But his nights were peopled with nightmares of snakes writhing, coiling, and uncoiling in his mind. Their fangs pierced him to the heart. He went to speak with them, but they would not listen.

By the unchanging light it was hard to tell what time it was in the forest, but Arune thought that it was noon when he reached the clearing he had been looking for. He had never seen it, except in dreams, and he stood for a while, struck with awe at the sight.

The tree at its heart was so thick he could barely encompass it with one gaze. Apsaras, the nymphs from heaven, glided up and down its massive trunk with peals of crystalline laughter. And far above the huge branches, he could glimpse the soft radiance of the city of the gods. He was seized with a desire to climb the tree, knowing fully well that he was mortal, and that no mortal had ever laid eyes on the city of heaven. He knew, in his heart of hearts, that it would feel like coming home at last. He shook his head. His place was in the mortal world. His kingdom awaited him.

* * *

The apsaras running back and forth from the top of the tree had not a glance for him. But he was Arune, who had been Gifted by the Triad, and the price he had paid for that was high enough. Power over demons and apsaras had been given unto him.

He spoke a word: a name. And one of the apsaras looked at him, startled, before coming to stand before him.

"You called my name," she said. She had a human shape that wavered; not one detail of her body would remain the same, but yet, without seeing her features, he knew that she was lovely, was everything that he had yearned for in every dream that he had had. Such was the nature of apsaras. But he knew what they were, and he knew that he was old, and weary of the mortal world, and that nothing he could do would make her his.

"Yes," he said. "I want something from the city of heaven."

"Steal something from the Triad?"

"No. It does not belong to the gods only. Your kind drink of it."

"The liquor," she laughed. "For such a small favour you have called my true name?"

"To me it means far more."

She smiled, and he was struck with a desire to embrace her, to lose himself in her. He held himself in check, remembered the game of dice, but it was hard to believe, in this place of beauty, that anything that evil, that foolish, could be happening in the outside world. "Wait here," she said, and flew towards the tree.

He watched her until she was lost to sight.

* * *

Some time later, he took the way back to the city of Ranesh. He carried a flask of rosy glass inside which swirled the colors of the rainbow, which he cradled against his chest as the most precious thing he had.

He had what he had come there for: the way to cure Kanti. To lift the curse and to take from Marek the kingdom that had been stolen from him. To make up for the lost twelve years. All that mattered to him, in the end, was playing the game of dice he had come to Ranesh for. Let Marek be happy with his wife–he did have a brief pang of regret, then, for what could have been, but for Kanti he felt only a shadow of his former desire– while he would have what lawfully belonged to him.

The path he had to take forded a river, the crossing of which was a difficult matter even in the dry season. On his way to the tree he had simply waded through the water, not without misgivings, but nothing had happened. He had not had anything of interest to them. Now he had.

And now they stood there, waiting for him.

Three of them, risen from the depths of the river, no longer entwined, but spread out over the width of the shallows to form a wall he would not be able to pass. They watched him.

The light under the canopy shone on their scales, created patterns of beauty on their arms and their coiled lower bodies. Arune stopped, leant on his staff. His heart was beating madly against his ribs; he felt weary, drained by the long walk. "I might have known that you would cheat," he said.

"We never said that we would not prevent you from reaching your goal," the nagas said, speaking with one voice.

"Does it mean that much to you?" he asked, slowly straightening, stretching his worn muscles, remembering everything he had learnt in the forest. "You were the ones who offered the bargain in the first place."

"We set the rules," the nagas said. "And we will not be defeated by a mere mortal."

He raised the staff, as if it could serve as a shield. The nagas laughed. "We do not fight as humans do."

Arune thought of Marek, and of the game of dice they were to play. Of Kanti and of the dying people of the South. "In the name of the Creator who stepped forth onto the waves with the flame of the world between his hands, I bid you to let me pass."

Only liquid laughter answered him. He came forward, till he was almost touching them, and said, "In the name of the Destroyer who once descended in human form for our salvation, I bid you to let me pass." And then he took one step forward, into the water, holding his staff as if to stab them with it.

The nagas shrank until nothing was left of them. He felt a wild exhilaration for one moment, and the river itself swelled with a rush of water. It washed over him; he stumbled, leant on his staff to recover his balance, and for a while he could hear nothing but the sound of water crashing around him.

His vision was filled with shimmering, illusory snake-shapes writhing within the river. He blinked to dispel them, and said, to complete the threefold invocation of the Triad, "In the name of the Protector who once fought the King of Demons–". But as soon as he opened his mouth it was filled with the coppery taste of the water. He gagged on it, took one more step, and the force of the river finally lifted his feet from the ground, and sent him tumbling into deep waters.

He could not breathe. Cold hands tugged at him, sought to prise his fingers from the flask he held. But he held on to it, stubbornly. They would not withdraw. An image of Kanti, taking the pins from her head with unbowed pride, shimmered before him, and he knew that he had to go back to her.

The rushing water carried him away from the ford; aquatic plants came to twine around

his feet, binding him to the bottom of the river. He could not see, not anymore; everything was becoming blurred around him.

"Arune," a voice said. He could not have told to whom it belonged. "Give it to us."

No, he thought, struggling to disentangle himself from the plants that seemed to have crept everywhere on him. He could not break his chains, could not inhale anything save more water. His body was arcing backwards to cough out the water he had already in his lungs, but he knew that to do so would be his death. *I cannot yield.*

The voice seemed to hear his thoughts. "He stole your kingdom from you. She betrayed your memory by marrying him. Would you help them? With your powers you could take what is yours from him without playing dice."

You do not understand. It has to be done properly. I need to play dice once more with Marek. And I gave my word that I would come back. He could feel the life ebbing out of him, the lack of air slowly killing him. He could not see anything anymore. But still he clung to the flask that he had gone so far to find. His deadened fingers, with algae twisting around them like henna patterns, would not unclench. He was no longer aware of anything but the necessity of maintaining his hold, even in the face of the encroaching darkness, even if he could not remember why it had to be done.

The plants were holding him fast. His whole face ached with the act of holding his mouth closed. *If I do not speak,* he thought, dimly, struggling to put coherent words together in his mind, *if I do not speak now, I will die all the same.*

"Arune," the voice said. It rang in his ears.

He opened his mouth. Water filled it again, but he managed to shout, somehow, "–I bid you to let me pass!" The last words were no longer intelligible. A cluster of bubbles tickled his lips as he finished the sentence, thus completing the invocation he had begun on the riverbank. He felt the plants break away, one by one, and the darkness that he had held at bay for so long seized him, and he knew no more.

* * *

Arune regained consciousness on the banks of the river, a long way from the ford where he had first tumbled into the water. He lay on his chest on something hard, and gritty particles of sand were pressing into his face.

Rising, with aching joints, he coughed up water tinged with blood. A dull pain flickered in the left side of his chest.

He no longer knew where he was. The river at his feet was muddy and its flow had slowed down to a trickle; it was hard to believe that he had almost drowned within its waters.

The flask.

He had a brief moment of panic before finding it near the place where he had lain. It seemed to contain the same liquor, but to be sure, he unstoppered it. It smelled sweet, and alien, like something far beyond him, something that had never been meant for the mortal world.

He was wary of water now, but still he stepped closer to the river to see where he was. Everywhere huge trees rose, forbidding, the forest barricading itself against the encroachment of mortals. He thought he could see where he was, but it seemed far away from the path that led to Ranesh. He would have to hurry on the way back if he wanted to be back before the dark of the moon.

* * *

Once within the forest, he made good time. He avoided rivers, or chose those that were close to running dry, and never once met any nagas. But he knew that they had not thought he would stoop to asking help from their own kin, that they had not believed he had gained that much power. That they would not stop until he had failed, and Kanti was theirs.

His sleep was restless; Kanti moved within all his dreams, her legs twisting out of shape, coiling and uncoiling like the plants that had seized his legs in the river. Her red eyes transfixed him.

I am coming, he said, but she could not hear him.

He had exited the forest, had walked through the drought-stricken cities, watching all the while the moon shrink until only a sliver of white light, like the edge of a nail, remained shining in the sky. He was a day from the city of Ranesh when he dreamt of Marek.

He stood in the gardens of his former palace. The other came to him with a board, and a set of dice, and said, "I have come for the game I promised you. Will you play, Arune?"

In his dream he said yes.

They sat around a low table, and he felt the powers granted by the forest and by the gods rise within him until his chest was full to bursting, until he felt that every word he said would shake the foundations of the palace. He threw the dice, watched them tumble.

"Again," Marek said, and Arune picked up the dice and threw them again.

"Again."

In the end Arune rose, and said, "I have won. Everything that belonged to you is now mine."

Marek laughed, and his laughter had nothing human. "Yours? What have you won, Arune? Nothing lasts long enough in this world. Nothing has any value or significance."

And, filled with a sense of foreboding that shook his whole frame, Arune turned, and looked at his palace, where Kanti had stood waiting for his return. He watched as it crumbled into dust.

"Arune!" Kanti called, and her voice was that of her youth, when they had been engaged.

He spoke a word of power, knowing full well that nothing could turn back the march of time. He heard the echo of his own voice as if underwater, felt the air tremble around him.

Snakes crawled out of the gardens as if in answer to his call. Kanti, standing before the ruins, looked at him, shivering, as tree snakes, hissing softly, joined cobras and adders to form a writhing mass heading for her.

"Arune," she called again. And some part of him knew, then, that it was a dream, and who had sent it, but he was powerless to stop.

You are not playing fair, Arune thought, but he dared not speak, for fear of seeing his words twisted out of shape again. He strode forward and plunged his hand into the writhing jumble of snakes, intending to lift it and cast it away from Kanti. The scales slid against his skin like a drowned man's caress. He could not hold on to anything.

And then he felt a searing pain in the palm of his left hand as two fangs pierced his skin.

He woke up.

His hand ached, and two dots in the palm still showed where he had been bitten. And he saw, through a haze that gradually filled the whole world, the small serpent that had sunk its fangs into his flesh crawl away, its bluish body curled around the flask of liquor, slowly but steadily dragging his prize away from him.

"No!" he shouted. He reached out with a faltering hand to stop the snake, but his arm fell limply by his side, and darkness, steadily rising, swallowed him whole.

* * *

In his fevered dreams Marek and Kanti kept appearing; odd shapes pulsed within his field of vision, and the nagas would not leave him alone. Snakes writhed before him, reared before lunging at him, and he was powerless to avoid them. He walked by the lake to begin his twelve years of exile, and spoke to the nagas, but they turned away from him, laughing, and he was left alone with the knowledge that he had lost everything, his land and his love and his life. He lost his mind in the forest, but there was no vision of the Triad to help him.

He woke up in a room that was vaguely familiar, but that he could not place. He lay on a woven mat, with a cushion propping his head slightly up, so that he felt the coldness of the stones under his back. For a while he remained staring at the ornate woodwork of the ceiling, too weak to move.

The palace, he thought. *I am in the palace. How did I end here?* And then he remembered the dream, and the snake.

The flask.

I was a fool, he thought, *to think I could win against the nagas.* He remembered what the cobra in the well had told him: *Power they gave you over the demons and the apsaras from heaven, but over my kind, none.* The nagas were subject only to the Triad itself, and he was but a lowly agent whom the gods had blessed with a small gift.

He fell asleep with his despair.

Sometime later, after he had awakened, Kanti and Marek came to him. They stood, side by side, watching him. They were not touching each other.

"You are lucky," Marek said. His face was bleak.

"Lucky?" Arune was watching Kanti. She wore the illusion Marek had devised for her, but he had been Gifted, and he could not help seeing through it now that he knew.

"The bite of the indigo krait is something few people recover from."

"Who healed me?" Arune asked.

Kanti's mouth curled at the corners, but the smile did not reach the rest of her face. "I did," she said. "The venom of snakes is something I should know about."

Arune was silent for a while. "How long until the next dark of the moon?" he asked at last.

"Two days," Kanti said.

"I have failed." Arune tried to rise on one elbow, but could not. "The liquor of the gods could have cured you, but the snake stole it from me."

"I see," Marek said at last.

"I did try."

"Peace, Arune. I am not faulting your zeal," Marek said. "You were near death when we found you."

"What will you do?"

Marek's face did not move. "I will say goodbye. And then I will honour my side of the bargain. I shall see you again soon, cousin."

He turned on his heels and left. Kanti did not follow him; she sat down cross-legged near his head. He had to twist his neck to see her properly, but the dull pain was one more thing to be endured.

Carefully, Kanti pulled every pin out of her hair, until he saw the face of a naga staring at him. The shadow of two more arms hung in the air around her chest, and yellow had invaded her irises. She said nothing for a while.

"I am sorry," Arune said at last, in a whisper. "I did not set out on this quest for him, but it would have pleased me to see you happy."

Kanti shook her head. "You set out to have your revenge, Arune. One more game of dice was all that mattered to you."

He tried to shake his head, but was too weak to move. "No. I did regret. I ought not to have gambled you away like a possession of mine."

"It was the custom," Kanti said at last. "A wife belongs to her husband, does she not?"

"The liquor would have lifted the curse away from you."

"Would it?" Her voice was a hiss, uninflected, but he could hear bitterness in every word. "Nothing could have changed what I have become."

"It would have made you human again."

She shook her head. "Oh, Arune. Twelve years in the forest listening to the voices of the gods, and still you are blind. The liquor might have changed my shape, but it would not have erased the memories. I would have remembered, Arune. The longing for water, the way I learnt to look at mankind like so many walking corpses, dependent on water to survive, while I would live until the end of the world. The greed and the pettiness. The possessiveness. Do you think I could have been a submissive wife once again?"

"There are some good men," he said at last.

"Marek?" She taunted him. "He is a man clinging to what he possessed once. His love is a refusal to see the truth." Her eyes were shining with an unearthly light, similar to what he had seen in the eyes of the apsara. "You see, Arune? Illusions, once lost, can never be summoned again. I have changed too much."

"No," he said.

She smiled, and for the first time he saw some of the old tenderness in her eyes. "Of course it has to be that way. Do not weep, Arune. There are things even a Gifted hermit cannot hope to win against." She rose, walked towards the door. Within the frame she stood, with the pins in her hand, looking at him. Her face under the hood was unreadable. "For what it is worth," she said, "I am sorry that I betrayed you by marrying Marek. I still had a choice, you know, no matter what you think. I could have followed you into your exile, but I did not."

And then she was gone.

* * *

Later that night, he watched Marek and Kanti in the gardens from a high window of the palace. They were sitting next to each other, their faces close to one another, like young lovers. Kanti was in human guise once more. He could not hear what they were saying.

He looked at his hand. The snake bite had almost disappeared, but he remembered all too well how he had felt. He had been saved. Reprieved once more after his arrogance had almost been the end of him.

By her.

It is not fair, he thought, watching the couple below. The air was unbearably dry, but he could hear, like a breath of moist wind, the answer the nagas would have given: *there is no fairness in the world. There is nothing in the world of mortals that can last.*

He turned away from the window. He felt old, older than ever, and the forest was further away than it had ever been. *I have what I wanted. I will regain my kingdom.* But the thought brought him no joy.

He went down into the gardens. Dancers were going through the elaborate re-enacting of the creation, fanning out like a lotus flower opening, and the court sat enraptured, watching the three masked men who stood for the Triad. None of it made sense, for how could they ever hope to encompass the true nature of the gods, so steeped as they were within the mortal world?

He bypassed the court, and went to see Marek and Kanti, who sat slightly apart, near the stone archway at the edge of the palace grounds.

As he arrived Kanti rose, looking now at both of them. She began withdrawing the pins from her hair again, until she stood in her true shape before her husband. She backed away from them, until the shadow of the archway covered her whole.

"Marek," she said, simply. Her voice sounded like water sloshing at the bottom of a well. Her mere presence brought the smell of rain within the arid gardens, and filled Arune with a tremendous sense of distance. What folly, to hope that she could be caged in any way. She partook of something that could not be contained within human bounds.

And she turned away from them, and began walking on the path that led to the lake. Arune and Marek both watched her go. The hermit's chest was constricted, as if a snake had coiled around it and was slowly squeezing his ribs. It was a bittersweet feeling the name of which eluded him.

Far, far below, she must have sensed their combined gazes, for she stopped, and looked back. The hood threw her face in shadow, and only the yellow, unblinking eyes were visible.

"What do you see?" Arune whispered.

And his cousin answered, in the same tone, "I see my wife, walking away from me."

Arune saw something that had moved far beyond the human world, but he said nothing. The other's voice was choked, as if he had been blinking back tears.

Pity, Arune thought. *This is the name of what I feel.* Both for Kanti, and for her husband, and it surprised him that he had come to Ranesh for his revenge on Marek, and could still feel sorry for the other. *He has lost everything.*

"I–" Arune said, and could think of no words that would not sound contrived.

"I will give you what you wanted," Marek said. "After this is over."

Below, a naga had risen from the lake, and Kanti was talking to it. They heard nothing, but at length she took its hand, and started walking into the water. It rose to cover her, as if eager to welcome her. She paused for a second when it reached her waist, but did not turn back, and soon they both had disappeared from the mortal world.

Arune, watching the surface of the lake, which was still trembling under the stars, said, "I have changed my mind."

"You will not take my kingdom away from me?" Marek's voice was bitter.

You have lost enough, Arune thought, but again he did not speak. "No. I will return to the forest." He felt the yearning to walk under the shadows of the canopy again, to experience once more the communion with the Triad, and knew that his twelve years spent on the paths under the trees had stolen the meaning from everything in the mortal world. "Rule well."

"How?" Marek asked, and there were such depths of anguish in his voice that Arune recoiled. "I cannot do this alone."

"You will learn." Arune felt the first hints of power enter his voice.

"You have taken a bitter revenge."

"I took no revenge," Arune said, truthfully. "I did all I could."

Marek's face, as he turned towards the hermit, was bathed with tears that caught the light from the palace.

"I am sorry," Arune said, to fill the silence.

Marek did not answer.

They stood, side by side, not touching, knowing that they would walk different paths, and never see each other afterwards. They did not speak.

They heard, overhead, the first peal of thunder, just as a lightning stroke tore the sky above the lake. In the cities of the South, the monsoon was coming at last. And, on the surface of the water, only ripples, extending to the whole lake, and then fading, until nothing remained but a mirror of the stormy sky above.

The End

Aliette de Bodard is a student in graduate school, majoring in Applied Maths (Data and Signal Processing). Her work is scheduled to appear in Fantastical Visions IV, an anthology of fantasy released in Spring 2006, and in Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine #28 (due December 2006). This story was inspired by a six-week humanitarian trip to India, which made her fall in love with the culture.

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opera. It was something to do, something she hadn't done here before, and her job at the World Council rarely left her time for her soaps. The Chinese ones were her favorites, verging as they did on the edge of illegal, all pseudo-violence and illicit code of honor brimming in the sub-text.

The road up the hill was empty and a breeze blew through her short brown hair to tickle her back as the bright yellow electric scooter whined its way slowly up the hillside. The temple ruins at the top of the hill were deserted in the cool air. Old crumbling columns stood in a semi-circle, the stone hilltop rising above. A small cypress clung grimly to the edge of the cliff. The island spread out below, small green hills rolling on down to the calm sea, her hotel a shining palace of glass looming over the natural harbor. She settled down on her blanket in the grass and dialed into the net.

Her soap failed to intrigue her. The classics she'd always meant to view bored her too as she dialed through them, one after another. Restless, she looked around. Perhaps she'd explore.

The shade at the edge of the valley looked like a tempting place to start. She picked her way over the shattered marble columns askew on the ground. Part of the temple roof hung onto the columns at a crazy slant, shielding a small crack into the mountain. It oozed moisture like a wound. Mignon stepped hesitantly closer, once more attracted and repelled by the thought of darkness, of loss of the link. A shadow of a cloud slid over her and she stepped back. Really, there was no reason why she should get all grubby exploring some dank little tunnel. There was absolutely no reason she should go in there.

She curled up on her blanket in the grass. Bees buzzed around her and the air smelled of wild oregano and mint tinged with the salt air of the ocean. A gentle breeze ruffled her hair as she dozed off. Shadows lengthened into evening as the sun set, throwing columns into sharp relief.

She woke up in a gray industrial room with a pounding headache. When she tried to sit up, she discovered both her arms and legs were strapped down. Immediately her nose started to itch. A set of beige office file cabinets, the long document kind, stood in the corner of the room. There wasn't anything else except her and the cot beneath her and the closed door. No apparent monitoring devices, no traces of electronic signature she could detect with any of her nodes.

She checked the restraints. Someone had done a good job; they were secure and wriggling didn't loosen them. The whole situation seemed familiar but she couldn't quite place it—another one of those feelings of déjà vu. Mignon reached again for her connection to the datastream, carefully checking the operation of the receivers in her spinal fins and nails. They were fully functional, but wherever she was was too deep; not even a mote of outside light reached her. A slight tingling of the beginnings of fear wriggled through her spine.

The door squeaked open and she braced herself, her thighs tensing tight against the restraints. If she could get an arm or leg free, even one, death would follow; instincts implanted during her training would take over. Yes, it was true, there were a thousand and one ways to kill a man—or a woman (anatomy does make a slight difference in approach) and Mignon knew them all, deep in her bones where instinct lay. Years as a field agent for the coalition and deep programming from the net ensured it.

The man entered the room slowly, his eyes making sure she was still strapped down. The door shut behind him. Of course there were probably more people outside the room, but if she could get a running start...

He leaned against the door and crossed his arms, staying a respectable distance away. Smart.

"Hello," he said. "Any chance you remember me?"

Mignon pressed her lips tightly together and refused to answer. No point in cooperating with the enemy, especially with 'pires. Some could twist your head around completely if you engaged with them. Their arguments could sound so logical, black would become white and day night, and the sun rising just the same as the sun setting. Before you knew it, you'd think it was a good idea to leave the grid and live in the darkness with them. You'd be rebelling for freedom of information and hacking into the censored news, always in the dark.

Besides, someone from the agency would come for her.

"No, I didn't think you would," he continued. "I hoped, but I knew better. We're going to have to go through this all again, I suppose. They're not coming. We blinded the sun and left a data transmission of you sailing."

His voice sounded familiar, but she was positive she didn't know this guy. He was attractive, sure, for a 'pire, even with the pasty white skin they all had from avoiding the sun. He had dark, brown hair, the color brown gets when the sun doesn't bleach it out, the brown of a long winter, the color of mahogany.

"You're not going to talk. I remember the routine. Last time it took you a week to make a sound, another two weeks before we could hold a reasonable conversation." He paused. "I wish you remembered me. I remember you very well." He sounded almost sad. "We spent a lot of time together."

Mignon glared at him but didn't speak. Surely she would remember him, the weeks missing out of her life. She'd remember the way his green eyes shone or the vertical worry lines above his nose.

"You're wondering why you don't remember any of this, Min, even the missing time," he said, almost as if reading her mind. His voice was smooth and silky with just the slightest touch of a northern island accent. "You see, I know you. I know you like those silly Chinese operas, you flash romances whenever possible, especially the banned ones; you love the sun and the feeling of being connected; you can't stand an unmade bed, even after love; you positively bounce out of bed in the morning at the most unreasonable hours, and you tend to fall asleep at night in the middle of conversations with no warning." He grinned at her. "I even know the nickname your brother called you by and how you hate hearing it from anyone else but me."

All of it was true. Any of it would be available in her dossier. Most of it. Perhaps not the part about the unmade bed or the despised nickname of "Min."

"And if we had time," he continued, still leaning relaxed against the door, "I would tell you all the things I told you before and let you make your own choice again. But we don't have time, this time, and you made a choice before, a choice that was taken away from you. I'm here to restore it."

Now *that* sounded like a threat. Mignon snorted.

"You're thinking threats are useless against you, pain can be blocked, and so forth. Of course, you're right. But you can't escape knowledge. You can't escape the data." He bowed slightly. Just before the door shut he turned back. "You loved me once, Min. I haven't stopped loving you, even if you don't remember. Sorry about this. I'd say this hurts me as much as it does you, but I know you won't believe that one bit. See you on the other side." He blew her a kiss as he left the room. He didn't look happy.

The ceiling slid away with a sharp snick to reveal a thousand lamps warming up orange. The bed flipped her over with its tentacles in a rolling peristalsis wave. Fins shivered on her spine. She brought all her strength to bear against the cuffs, thrashing and twisting. If she

survived, her wrists and ankles would be bruised for weeks. If she survived.

The lamps lowered slowly, cruising down calmly. For once, she needed the relief of shadows. The light crashed on in a blinding wave, and Mignon was overwhelmed by light, by the data riding the photons. She drowned in an ocean of white, sunspots dancing about her closed eyes.

And data surrounded her, not the gentle warmth of the feed in the Mediterranean sun, but the streams of the fires of hell itself as information was forced into her system. She couldn't avoid it, didn't want it, but her choice didn't matter.

She ran, looking for escape in her memory theatre. Statues of people blurred past. She didn't pay attention to the library of books, the endless screens of her favorite saved shows. Looking for a dark corner to hide in occupied her attention, a place to shield herself from the tsunami rolling implacably toward her. Foamy waves of light streamed out to crush her mind, to remake her. The light rolled over all and she felt it all being stripped away, the shows and the books—the memories. We are nothing but a sum of our memories, she'd been taught. Unlike past generations, nothing had to be forgotten. Riding the photons allowed every person on the planet room to remember, to cherish the past and replay it as necessary, vividly complete.

All except the people that mutilated themselves by ripping out the neonatal implants. They denied the sun and life in the name of freedom. They said all they wanted was for the network to be free again, under the control of the people, like it was at the beginning. Mignon thought it was a silly, stupid, and even dangerous thought. Imagine if every person added what he or she wanted to the network! It would soon fill up with lies, exaggerations. No, only the World Coalition could be trusted to enter information.

She rolled away under the crushing brilliance, all her memories, bits of herself leaking out the edges until she lay on the center of the stage. Naked, formless, weeping, without a memorial left.

He walked back in with darkness, sat down beside her, and linked to her system. "Hi, Min."

"That's my name?" she hesitatingly asked.

He smiled down at her, a strange smile that refused to grow into his eyes, which stayed sad and deep. "Yes, that's your name. Are you ready to start again?"

She shrugged.

The light returned and with it, fragments of memories seeped in.

Ooze.

Sitting in a cell looking at her wrists, she wonders if she has the strength to keep up this silence. Every day the woman comes in and sits on the floor with Mignon, waiting. Waiting for her to say something, waiting for Mignon to acknowledge her existence, patiently waiting all day long. She's denied the sun, denied the link, but otherwise is not harmed unless terminal boredom counts. The woman talks on. She lifts her shirt to show Mignon her back, thick knobby scars on each vertebra where her fins used to lie.

Finally, Mignon starts to talk, but not to the woman. She talks to Mark, an ex-agent she once worked with. She'd been the one to bring him in for espionage. He disappeared one night from the coalition cells. Now he was part of the underground, the enemy, but at least he was someone she could talk to. They spend long days arguing politics and theology, and she doesn't know when she gradually moves from tolerance to friendship.

Trickle.

Here she's in a strange apartment with blacked out windows and thick heavy floral

curtains, making love to a green-eyed, brown-haired man while on her lunch break. The uneaten peanut butter sandwich is just out of reach on the nightstand.

Drip.

Running through the night from something she can't quite see, stumbling over thick roots in the fog, heart pounding and eyes flitting ahead, looking for escape, but before she can…

Drop.

They're arguing again.

"You can't keep playing this. They know," Mark says.

She says, "They don't suspect a thing."

He says, "You have to choose."

She laughs. "Afraid you'll lose me?" she asks, reaching up to tug the lock of hair fallen over his eyes. She pulls him in for a kiss. She loves the way he tastes, loves the way his hands flutter against her back as her tongue slips in his cool mouth.

"This doesn't solve the problem, Min," he breathes against her lips.

"I know," she says, "but I don't care."

ROAR.

She walks into work and sits primly in her cubicle, a bit sore from the night before, spent not in love, but in chasing down a 'pire with Mark. Her assignment today will be to pretend to catch the 'pire she let go last night. She stretches, yawning heavily and waves over the walls to Adam. David, her boss, walks by with Kathleen, her field supervisor and handler.

Her data link beeps red high in her vision, indicating she's wanted.

David's office is spacious, sunlit, and cool.

"We've been watching you," he says. Beside him, Kathleen nods in agreement with everything he says, a permanent smile pasted on her face. Suck-up, Min thinks. She tries to look calm, tries to look like she has no idea what he's talking about.

"We know about your intimate involvement," he says with a slight emphasis on the word 'involvement', "with the rebellion." He'd never gotten over the fact they were no longer lovers.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

David smirks. "We have pictures, we have audio, we've got data on everything you've been doing."

Oh shit, Min thinks. And I thought we were being so careful.

"You've got a choice to make," David says. His blue eyes narrow. "Come back to the fold."

"Or," she says, knowing it's an empty bravado.

"Or we make you."

SPLASH.

The present rained down around her as she remembered it all, the running, the catching, - the coalition wiping her mind.

"You can't go on doing this," Mark told her when she opened her eyes. He massaged her right wrist in between his warm hands, a bit too strongly. "Sorry," he said as she winced. "This is the second time you've had a complete replacement. If they find you again, they'll fracture your soul with a third."

She pulled her hand away, thinking about the remnants of replacements, agents locked in beige padded rooms gibbering at the doorways. The long corridor stretched a full wing of the agency hospital. The psych doctors called it the "hallway of infinite potential," though there wasn't much potential left.

"What happened?" she asked, changing the subject, turning his palm over in her hand to

rub the edge of the wrist where the old jackport scars were.

"Someone leaked your name. We don't know who. You had enough warning to try and run."

"But I failed," she said dryly.

"Yes," he answered. "You failed. We tried a rescue mission, but we couldn't find you, so we waited. I waited." He kissed the port on her wrist, sending tiny shivers along the back of her neck, small hairs stirring to life. "Someone at the agency must have decided you were worth salvaging. They replaced your memories and sent you off on a fictitious vacation, watching you the whole time to make sure you were theirs again. We watched too."

"You came after me on the island. Risky."

He laughed and brushed his hair back. "The island was the one place they never expected us to be. In the middle of their stronghold? Impossible!" He smiled. "So we snagged you back, just like I promised."

Min struggled to sit up. She leaned into his broad chest, listening to the steady thrub dub dub of his heart. He smelled like lavender soap.

"We wanted," he paused and corrected. "***I*** wanted to make sure you had a choice again," he said.

"What happens now?" she asked, content to be held, if just for this moment. All her time with Mark was stolen moments, fractured memories still reassembling in her brain. She remembered them in flashes, the way he looked stepping out of the shower and walking away from her to rummage through his laundry. The two of them entwined in bed as Mark read chapters out loud, from an antique paper book called *Alice through the Looking Glass*. Imagine actually reading from a book, she'd thought at the time, but when she closed her eyes and let the words form images, it was almost as good as the net.

"You stay with me," he said, pinching the bridge of her nose with two fingers. The pressure felt good, made her realize how tense she'd been, even on nominal vacation.

Of course Min could stay with Mark. They could live together. Running, always running, hiding from the sun, no daylight in the future, only dark rooms and damp caves, shuttled from place to place on the vast underground network. Turning into a pale creature of the night, hunted always by the other agents, a 'pire herself. There was no way the agency would let her go without a fight that would last the rest of her (probably short) life. After all, she'd come after Mark in the first place when he went renegade. It was only luck that led them to love.

"That's the only option?" Min asked, as much of herself, as of him.

He held her even tighter, forcing spine fins into his chest. "We could do the surgery now," he said.

She sighed and looked at her fingers, each node shining at the end. Not only would she never be able to upload again through the jacks, she'd never be able to sit in the sun with her fins exposed, soaking in the data bath. Exiled from heaven.

"I need to think about this, Mark," she said finally. "Can I have just a few days?"

"Min, we don't have much time. Every day you're able to access the grid leads them closer. A blackness in their sensors is always a cause for alarm." His arms tightened. "You know how important this is. The coalition is winning. We can't allow them to discover any more bases, to cripple us even further. In two nights we'll strike back, disabling satellites across the net, replacing propaganda with truth. We can't let you destroy that."

She'd forgotten about the mission in her happiness to be back with Mark.

"I know," she said, wriggling around to bury her head in the crook of his arm. "Just one

more day. Just let me think a bit."

"Going back is more dangerous than you realize." He tightened his grip around her body.

"Staying would kill me, Mark. I can't live like this, even with you." She kissed his chest, feeling him stiffen again, but in a completely different way. They tumbled under the sheets together. Her hand crept down his back, feeling the old scars on his spine.

One night later she left, creeping out during a full moon, emerging from corridor stairs directly into a meadow. The door snicked shut behind her, latching with a faint click, the lines of it invisible in the redwood tree. Water gurgled through ferns and mossy rocks. Frogs gulped softly in the distance.

She left Mark asleep in bed, her surgery scheduled for the early morning, a transfer planned for the afternoon. She left her clothes and a kiss and forced herself to not look back. Getting past the guards was easy; she knew their routines and the compound was quiet. Almost too quiet, she thought as she slipped down a dim hallway. As if they weren't watching her at all, weren't suspicious of her. Well, they shouldn't be, she thought. She was going back to help the cause.

Memories were pushed into a small closet in the theatre, the door locked. Random refuse and bits of scraps in large plastic trash cans piled in front, waiting for her to take them to the garbage can.

Min loved him, but his was not a life she could lead. The only way they had a chance, the only way the rebellion would succeed, was through people living a duplicitous life, segmenting memories, freeing the running 'pires, working for the day the system would shut down and all could walk in the sunlight again. Data would be free as the air and under no person's, no one single government's, control ever again. She knew she was needed as a double-agent, knew she could fool the coalition again, though something deep inside told her she was being naïve.

She ran. As soon as her body hit the moonlight, she was back on the grid, for what was moonlight but a pale reflection of the sun's data?

They caught her so fast it was almost like they were waiting. Odd, she thought with a small misgiving.

"Thank goodness," she said, panting on the ground, her knees bruised by the fall. "I escaped."

The man holding her grabbed her wrists and twisted them behind her back without speaking, prodding her forward into a stumbling walk. He held her up when she slipped on the slimy roots, when her feet stumbled in the wet ground, firing questions at her non-stop.

Min babbled answers. A kidnapping while on vacation at the island, days of deprivation in cells deep beneath the earth, cut off from the stream, unable to access or get a message out, until finally, while her captors slept, she escaped.

"No, I don't know the location of the base. It's probably around here somewhere." She didn't worry. Leaving would have triggered an alarm; the base would be emptied by now. She frowned for a second. Had there been something important happening tonight? She couldn't remember. Unusual for her, but it had been happening a lot lately. Finally, she pretended to swoon to avoid further questions.

She 'woke up' in headquarters, lying limply on a black leather couch in David's office. Sunlight streamed through the picture windows and her skin stuck to the dermis of the couch. When she sat up, her flesh made small popping sounds pulling away.

"Some clothes," David said, tossing a bundle at her. She unwrapped it and put the suit on slowly; standard gear—a backless jumpsuit to allow fins to flow free, form fitted cups to hold

breasts in the front, dark gray. David watched her. She buried her nervousness down deep and tried to smile.

"Welcome back." He leaned against his desk. Min had to squint to look at him silhouetted in the windows. His golden hair was slicked back as usual, but she could see escaping tendrils in the light.

"Did you find them?" she asked, leaning back and spreading her arms against the back of the couch, feigning nonchalance.

"Yes," he said. Her heart pounded. What had she done? She remembered now the plans for disabling the satellites, for hacking the system, the importance of the base. Mark had impressed upon her all those things, how could she possibly have forgotten! It wasn't like her at all.

"We know, Mignette," he said.

"Know what?" she asked, honestly puzzled. Deep in a corner of her mind a closet door squeaked shut as he called her Mignette. It was his pet name for her, from a time long ago when they both started in the agency. Why would he be using it now?

"You just need to remember yourself," he said. David sat down on the shiny, gray marble desktop, large enough to be the lid of a coffin.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what you're talking about. I must be in shock. The kidnapping—perhaps they did something to my systems," she said, while part of her mind buzzed away erasing odd associations, sweeping away memories of a smell of musk and the glow of a dimmed fluorescent light across white sheets. She stuffed memories into the backs of old books, swept them under the furniture with dust bunnies. A surface scan would reveal only her cover, not her hidden self.

David sighed. "Yes, your friend Mark and his alliance." He hopped off the desk and walked towards her. "I want you to listen very carefully," he said, leaning forward. "This is very important." He reached his hands out to hold her face. His fingers smelled slightly of tuna fish sandwich and spicy mustard. "I have a mnemonic key for you."

David tenderly stroked her cheek. "Kim Philby," he said.

She remembered the old story. Kim Philby, a Cold War Soviet spy, one of the most famous double agents of the twentieth century. He betrayed his country, justifying it by saying democracies were too weak to withstand the rise of fascism. In the long-term he had been right.

"Oh no," she gasped as realization hit her.

The words pierced through the layers of maze-eaten memory. In the darkness of the theatre a crypt cracked open, a sarcophagus lid slid to the right and darkness rose. She didn't recall ever building this lower level, didn't know it could be accessed.

A figure sat up, dressed in ghostly white, and candlelight flickered as she drew closer.

She looked like Min, like her face seen in the mirror, except she'd never seen her own face in three dimensions. Never seen her own face making these expressions. This face was slightly more feral, slightly more lidded, and slightly more vulpine. She smiled at herself and darkness erupted.

With a crash of lightning she remembered.

Remembered lazy afternoons spent with David in the sunshine, plotting the downfall of the 'pire network, hands briefly overlapping, touching, grabbing. Sharing each other's innermost thoughts in a way Mark and she never had, jacked in together through wrists and toes, clasped by wires.

"Oh," Mignette said and opened her eyes. "I remember now." She shook off her other persona quickly. What a simple fool Min had been! And Mignon was just a cover provided by the

coalition, not even deep enough to really matter.

David smiled and sat beside her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “Good,” he said. “I knew you would.”

Somewhere in her mind, in the small closet, Min and Mignon screamed but it wasn’t her screaming, just disposable copies, some fluttering memories of truth.

“If you’ll just jack in,” he said, “we’ll be through with this. I fancy some time on the island together.”

Mignette snuggled against his narrow chest, his ribs jutting frail against her head, so different from Mark. “Sunshine and strawberries,” she purred.

He laughed and pulled her to her feet. “Sunshine and strawberries, I promise.”

“And some excitement,” she added. “I almost died of boredom alone on that island. And then to be stuck with that earnest drudge, Mark.” She shuddered delicately. “Almost too much to bear.” She rubbed her hands through her hair. One of the fools inside her had cut it way too short. No matter, hair would grow and she could dye it the red she favored. “You found the base in time?”

“Of course,” David said, licking the whorl of her ear. “It’s almost finished. We’ll get the data dump and see they’re scrubbed away. No more angst, no more doubt.”

He pulled her towards the desk as they kissed, working her around to the chair and pulled the console out. “Patience,” he said, pulling away from her reluctantly. “We’ll have time.”

She pouted. “Now,” she said.

“Mignette,” he said firmly. “Later.”

She sulked into the leather chair and snapped her wrists into foamset. With a sharp pain of completion the needles slid in, sending tendrils up and through, uploading her memories of Min and Mignon.

The door opened and all her memories of the resistance poured out, all the plans Mark and Min had made, the names of other double-agents, locations of bases, underground shelters, and transportation routes. At the back, crouching in the darkness, Min sat with her hands over her head, hiding, denying, and whimpering as Mignette betrayed them all in the bright, bright sunlight.

Mark stepped from the shadows of Min’s memory as she reached into the dark corners to sweep out the lint.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Mignette turned away. Min looked up hopefully.

“Min, I want you to understand you’ve never betrayed us. Even if the memories you have now say so, even if you’re uploading everything you think you know. Wheels turn within wheels.” He paused. “Thank you for being willing to do this at the cost of yourself.”

The back of the closet opened and light poured out. The innards of a clock ticked and chimed, gears upon gears meshing and clacking teeth against each other as they turned round and round. Mark smiled at Min, his smile one of sadness.

David’s hands reached around from the back of the chair, working their way down her shoulders. His breath shivered against her hair as he looked over her shoulder at the console screen.

“Endgame,” Mark said softly. “I’m so very sorry. I would salvage you if I could.”

The light poured out through her mind, streaming down lungs into her blood, whirring along through her wrists and poured out the jacks into the system.

The clock erupted. Tiny wheels popped off and clattered down in a rain around her.

"That's not right," David said, his voice rising "What the hell are you doing?"

What was she doing? Why were David and Mark dancing together in her mind as the clock chimed midnight? What was she doing here? Where were the island and the sun?

The light overpowered her.

"Stop it!" David roared, grabbing her hands to pull them away from the console.

Before she knew it she'd disengaged from the console, reflexes kicking in. It only took her a few seconds to kill him - a quick snap of the neck, a crunch of bone and then she was back in the system.

She poured in everything she knew and everything Mark had implanted inside her. She poured in all her selves without restraint. Silly Min and her love for Mark. Double-agent Mignon trying to help the alliance. Triple-agent Mignette, dedicated to the coalition. All of them ran through her, into the system along with the clock, the code. She didn't hold anything back, not even the core of herself, the essential bits making her… Who was she?

Slowly the theatre started to fade to black, lights popping out one by one. The jacks stubbornly held her wrists attached as she rained the virus into the system along with chunks of her shattered mind, until only one pool of light was left, shining on a blank face she knew she should recognize.

A strange, pale man visits her occasionally, when she's pumped up on enough drugs to be able to focus on one facet of the crystal long enough to watch the rainbows. He holds her hand and strokes it over and over again while she just watches it lie limply.

"We won. You crashed the system," he says, but his voice breaks. "I'm so sorry." She doesn't know what this man wants with her.

In the corner one woman screams at her from a coffin. In another a woman dances in the sun. Round the edge another huddles in a puddle of sheets with fluorescent lights glowing softly from the corner. They all have her face, and she wonders why. Through the small window in the soft room she can see the long line of the corridor stretching out to infinity along with her mind. And every window has Mignon's, Min's, Mignette's face peering out, confused.

The End

Calie Voorhis is a life-long science fiction fan and a self-avowed geek. Last year, she left her career in public safety software to freelance and concentrate on writing fiction. This is her first published story and she is currently revising her first book, "Darkness Follows."

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seemed earnest.

Robert shifted his umbrella to his left shoulder, giving her partial cover.

"Thank you."

"So if you don't mind my asking," Robert said, while trying to look at anything but the apparent young woman beside him, "what exactly are you?"

She cocked her head toward him. The quick, bird-like gesture made her hair bob. She regarded him with dark eyes. "I would have thought you knew the answer to that question, considering how easily you saw through my glamour."

"I'm just an observant sort," Robert replied. "So are you some kind of alien come to study the human race?"

She laughed. A delicate sound, it reminded Robert of spring breezes rustling the newly budded leaves. "I am as much of this world as you."

When the bus pulled up to the curb, she climbed aboard, graceful even in so simple an act. Robert stood and, working both canes with the practiced ease of experience, climbed aboard after her. She sat on the first forward facing seat, patting the empty spot next to her. Robert dropped his quarters in the cash box and sat beside her with a heavy thud.

"I saw you go into Urban Bean last week. Do you work there?" Robert asked.

"Yes," she answered brightly. "My first real world job. But today I do not work. Today I am going simply to watch."

Robert thought about what he wanted to say next. For the first time in almost two years, his curiosity nudged him. "Could I buy you a cup of coffee?" he asked. "We could finish our conversation, if you'd like."

"That would be pleasant," she said.

"My name's Robert, by the way."

She smiled at him, looking for all the world like Mona Lisa with purple hair and dipped in pixie dust. "You may call me Zoë."

* * *

Robert sat in the coffee shop and waited for Zoë to finish working. Over the last three weeks they had met every night after her shift ended. Robert discovered she actually was something akin to a pixie. She had left her family and was trying to disguise herself as a mortal woman. She slept in the various parks scattered around the city, her nature causing her to prefer the outdoors to structures and buildings. Robert gave her pointers on appropriate dress and behavior, which she mostly followed.

Zoë glided toward the small corner table where Robert sat, two steaming cups in her hand. "Good evening, Robert," she said, sitting down across from him.

Robert smiled. He kept trying to train her out of the overly formal way she spoke, telling her it clashed with the persona she desired to build. So far his attempts at changing her diction had failed miserably.

Robert took the offered cup. "Thanks." He took a sip of the frothy coffee. A hint of cinnamon touched his tongue. "It's good."

"I made it myself," she said, sounding like a happy child. "Robert, may I ask you a question?"

Robert set his cup down. The flippant quip died on his lips. Her eyes regarded him, dark and serious. "Sure, ask anything you want."

She fidgeted with her cup for a moment, then took the small butterfly clip from her short purple hair. She turned the clip over and over in her fingers. She looked up at him. "What happened to your legs? I only ask because," she paused and wet her lips with her tongue, "among my folk you do not see such things. Either we are whole, or we cease being."

"No gimps allowed in fairytale land, huh?" Robert said quietly.

"I apologize," she said, dropping her eyes. "I did not mean to offend. My people suffer injury just as yours, but one of my kin could never survive such a terrible loss. The grief would cut too deeply."

Robert sighed and looked into his cup. "Mortals are experts at causing and surviving suffering," he whispered. "It's okay you asked, I'm not angry, I just..." He paused and selected his words. "I lost them in an accident," he said in a calm, even voice. "A harried soccer mom with a cell phone glued to her ear didn't see me in the crosswalk. Both my legs were crushed below the knee."

"And you carried on?" Zoë asked

"What could I do? Of course I was depressed, and then angry. I even thought about killing myself, but in the end what could I do except go on?"

"I do not know if I could survive such a tragedy."

Robert reached over the table and placed his hand over her tiny one. "If you want to be a real girl, you have to learn to survive tragedy. So, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course," she said.

"Why do you want to live in my world so badly? If your realms are so beautiful, why would anyone want to leave?"

Zoë considered his question for several moments. "My home may be forever spring, but it is not a perfect realm." She took a deep sip of her coffee. "Everything in my world is structured, unchanging," Zoë said with a sigh. She pointed across the room to a young blonde woman decked out in clothing falling somewhere between punk and Goth. "I want to be her."

"How do you know her life is any better?" Robert asked.

"At least her entire destiny has not been written in the barks of the oaks since her birth."

"And your life has?"

Zoë looked at him like he had asked if the sky were blue. "Of course. So it is for all my people. Everything I am supposed to become, my life as it should progress from the moment of my creation until the end of my existence, is spelled out plainly."

"So your people don't have free will?"

Zoë again seemed surprised at his question. "Yes, we do. We simply know in advance the important events of our existence. For instance, I know to whom I am pledged to bond with and how many children I shall produce. Our families take this very seriously. The ceremonies for our joining are planned, and a suitable dwelling for my future family is already established."

"So you're running from your destiny? Can your people change things that are, as you said, written in the trees?"

"Yes," Zoë answered simply.

"You're not telling me something," Robert said.

Zoë glanced at him over the rim of her cup. "In the tales told to us as children, there are always serious consequences when one tries to avoid fate."

"Yet you're willing to risk those possible consequences?" Robert asked, finishing his coffee.

"Yes."

"You don't really want to talk about it though, do you?"

"No, I do not." Zoë regarded Robert. She smiled. "I would like you to take me to your home, please."

Robert's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

Zoë looked confused at his question. "Yes. I have never seen inside the dwelling place of a mortal. I did not think you would mind hosting me."

"I don't mind you coming over, Zoë. It's just I'm not used to beautiful young women asking to go home with me," Robert said, smiling. "Even if it is just because they've never seen the insides of a human dwelling before."

"Oh," she answered.

Robert stood and held out his hand. She took it and stood, placing her hand on his elbow as he picked up his canes and started for the door. Together, they left the coffee shop.

* * *

Robert wheeled to his front door, cursing softly at whoever was holding the doorbell button down.

He opened it to find Zoë standing in the dimly lit hallway, holding a pie. "Hello, Zoë." Robert looked from Zoë to the pie and back again. "Where did you get a cherry pie at this time of the morning?"

"I found it." She stepped lightly into the apartment and set the pie on the coffee table.

Over the past two months Robert never questioned her seemingly random comings and goings. He enjoyed his friendship with Zoë. She could be exasperating at times, like now, appearing at his door at two in the morning bearing a possibly stolen cherry pie, but he cared for her deeply.

"So is there a special occasion of some sort?" He closed the door and wheeled his chair after her.

"Yes. We are celebrating," Zoë explained, carefully setting the pie on the coffee table. She perched on the edge of the sofa.

Robert wheeled to the kitchen and retrieved the necessary plates and utensils. "I see. What exactly are we celebrating?" he called out.

"I have secured a dwelling for myself," Zoë said as Robert returned from the kitchen and started cutting into the pie.

"Good." Robert had been teaching her about handling money and paying for necessities. Lacking any proper identification, Zoë could only work for under-the-table pay and tips.

"You are not wearing your legs," Zoë said, nodding at his chair as she took a bite of pie.

"I needed to get them off for a bit." He pulled himself out of his chair, moving to the couch next to her. Robert raised a forkful of pie. "To new homes."

"New homes," she mumbled around a mouthful of cherry filling.

"Do you ever miss your old home?" he asked after they finished their pie.

Her eyes turned sad. "Yes, I miss my family, but I do not desire to return. I do not wish to live as they would have me live."

Robert reached over and put a reassuring arm around her. She leaned into him. She smelled of cherry pie, green grass, and spring. "I'm surprised they haven't come looking for you yet." Robert said.

"They have. But it is hard for them to see me clearly now. The longer I dwell in the mortal world, the harder I become to find."

"But?" Robert asked.

She snuggled closer to him. "But I will need to go home someday. I cannot live as a mortal forever. I am not one, after all, so I must return. If I dwell over-long here, I risk forgetting who I am and fading away."

"Will I still be able to see you when you do go back?"

"Mortals should not look so deeply into faerie," she said in an unusually serious tone. "Many who do cannot stop gazing."

Robert snorted. "My name isn't Thomas."

"No. It is Robert, and I would not want you to lose yourself." She sat up straight, and regarded him seriously. "Once you look deeply into the Fair Realms, you will never be able to return to your previous state. You must be sure of your heart before you wish for such a thing."

"I wish I could see clearly into faerie," Robert replied. He looked down into her eyes. "I know my heart, Zoë."

"If that is want you want," Zoë said, closing the distance between them. She placed her lips lightly on his.

Robert felt a mild tingle pass between them. He started to pull away, but she reached behind his head and held him close. When she finally broke the kiss, Robert looked at her. "What are you..." Robert started to ask. He stopped when he looked into her eyes. They seemed larger and darker than he remembered.

She pushed him down on the couch with surprising strength.

"Hush," she said. She leaned down and placed her lips to his again, more forcefully this time.

Robert felt the tingle start again, growing stronger and more pleasant with each passing second. When Zoë pressed her tongue into his mouth, it proved more contact than Robert could handle. Conscious thought fled. He only wanted to touch every part of her. He only wanted her. Robert felt clothing being removed, then her bare skin pressed against his. The feeling pushed him over the edge.

He blacked out.

Robert woke up alone. A blanket had been thrown over his naked body at some point. He sat up and smiled. Everything seemed as bright and clear as a sunny morning after a gentle rain shower. Pulling the blanket tightly around himself, Robert moved into his wheelchair and went to the low window overlooking the apartment complex courtyard. He looked outside. There were tiny creatures, furred and winged, gliding between the trees below. Robert laughed aloud. He couldn't wait to see Zoë again. He wanted to talk about his new sight. He wanted Zoë to show him the beauty of her world.

He didn't see her again for two decades.

* * *

Robert stood outside the doorway of the small, run down walk up apartment, one of the many older dwellings near the University that students sometimes rented. The dark creatures known as Boggals led him to this place, telling him the one who lived here might have the information he sought.

Robert knocked on the door.

A pale young woman with chin-length black hair opened it. She gave him an appraising look, taking in his two canes.

"Well," she said.

"Um, I understand you might know a woman named Zoë."

"Let's suppose I do. Why should I tell you?" She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe.

"I...she's an old friend, and I just want to touch base with her, that's all."

The young woman's eyes narrowed. "So how come I've never seen you around before?"

"It's been a long time since I've seen her," Robert said evenly. "Look, let's cut the crap. I need to find Zoë. I need to ask her something, something important and private. You're my best lead in five years. If you know something, I'd appreciate the help."

The woman gave him a long look, then sighed. "I don't know where she is anymore." The woman frowned at him. "She left a couple of years ago. She used to hang out at Hidden Falls, but I haven't seen her there in months."

"Could she have gone home?"

The woman shook. "She couldn't go home. She said she'd given away her grace, and forgotten the path."

Robert felt his stomach twist painfully.

"You need to find her before she fades away," the woman hissed. "I don't want to lose her." She narrowed her eyes at him menacingly. "She's important to me."

"Then help me find her." An idea formed in Robert's mind. "Do you have anything of hers?"

The woman regarded him for a moment before coming to a decision. "Come in," she said, stepping aside to allow him entry. She pointed toward the couch. "Have a seat, I'll be right back."

Robert sat down and looked around the room. Textbooks, notepads, and art supplies lay scattered about. In one corner a computer hummed. A charcoal sketch over the desk caught Robert's eye. He knew the face in the sketch: it could only be Zoë. He scanned the room for more clues but found none.

"Here, she left this."

Robert turned to find the woman holding out a ragged black T-shirt.

Robert took the shirt. He could feel Zoë now that he held something of hers. Robert closed his eyes. He focused on his memories of Zoë, thought of her laughter, her smile. She seemed closer. He focused the sight she had given him—her grace—as the young woman called it, on the memory of Zoë. For a moment it drifted toward the woman standing next to him. It paused, as if recognizing her, then it sought farther away. It reached out for Zoë, eager to return to its rightful owner. Robert smiled and opened his eyes.

"So?" the young woman said.

"I know where she is." Robert stood and started for the door. He paused and turned to look at the young woman. "She never told me any of this. I didn't understand what she had given me." Robert smiled at her. "I didn't ask your name."

The woman frowned at him, "Tara."

"You have your mother's eyes."

"Just go to her."

Robert nodded and left the apartment.

It took him one transfer on the city transit trains to reach his destination. When he found her sitting among the flowers at the municipal conservatory, he stood quietly and observed her.

Mortal life had not been kind to Zoë. Though she seemed no older, she looked diminished to his eyes. The glow that usually surrounded her had vanished, leaving a dull finish in its place. Her hair was no longer purple: limp, dirty blonde locks hung ragged on her head. Her body

seemed fragile, as if a strong breeze could break her. She might be forever young, but no longer forever spring. Autumn had settled on her shoulders, and hints of winter swirled about her.

"Zoë," he said, stepping toward her.

She looked up at him. Her mouth opened in surprise. "I remember you."

Robert sat next to her and touched her arm. She felt cold and hard. "Why didn't you come back to me? I've been looking for you all these years. Why didn't you tell me about our daughter?"

"I could not come back. They traced me to you that night. I barely managed to slip past them. I meant to come back when they stopped watching you." She smiled sadly at him. "They never stopped. Then I discovered a life growing inside me. I would not let them take our child into their realm. I meant to keep her hidden until she grew old enough to choose for herself. I used what little magic I could still work to hide us and we lived a mortal life. I am sorry Robert, but I had to protect her."

Robert gazed at her. "Why didn't you come to me afterward? I know you need to go back; you should have come to me, and taken your gift back."

"Because I forgot you. I forgot your face. I forgot your voice. I forgot you so I would never come to you, and fall into my kinsmen's trap. I forgot you so our daughter would not suffer the life they would have forced on her. I forgot until you called my name."

Robert stood and reached out a hand to her. She took it and stood up. Once standing, she slipped her hand to his elbow and they slowly ambled out of the conservatory toward the train platform. Neither spoke until they reached Robert's apartment.

Zoë walked through the door and looked around in wonder. "It looks so different."

"It is different. I've only lived here two years. Please, make yourself comfortable. I'll find us something to drink, and we can talk."

Robert stepped out of the living room, went into the bedroom and took off his prosthetics. He settled into his old wheelchair, rolled to the kitchen, and made coffee. Returning to the living room, he set the cups down on the battered old coffee table.

"You do not look different," Zoë observed.

"I've aged well," Robert said with a shrug. He looked like someone in his mid-thirties, not almost fifty.

"You have aged, yes, but slowly, far more slowly than those around you. The Fair Realms have touched you deeply."

Robert nodded. "I admit I am drawn to your world. I can see the fey as they live their daily lives right next to mortals. At night, I dream of a grand court, and the splendor of the lords and ladies who attended it."

"I feared as much," she said, setting her cup down. "I cannot take back what I have given. You have touched the enduring grace of the bright realms, and the sorrow in your soul at its departure would surely drive you insane."

"I *might* go mad, but without it you *will* fade and die."

Zoë smiled at him. "Perhaps we should leave this for later. I do not wish to argue with you this night."

Robert nodded his agreement.

"Will your family come looking for you now, demanding you fulfill your destiny?" he asked.

Zoë shook her head. "No. To take a mortal lover and bear his child proved enough to cause that oak to fall, and its bark to rot away."

"Tell me about our daughter," Robert said.

Zoë told him everything, from her surprise at discovering herself with child, to her decision

to hide the child from her kin. She spoke quietly of the struggle to provide for her daughter. She told him, before the forgetting she placed on herself, she had considered leaving Tara on his doorstep, but could not find a way to slip past his watchers. She spoke with pride of Tara's art and the university scholarship it won her. She told him about the night she left Tara; how she explained everything to her daughter. Once finished she sat, staring at nothing, eyes filled with sadness.

"Out of curiosity," Robert said, "which one of her parents does Tara take after?"

Zoë graced him with a smile. "Our child has one foot in each world, but the choice to do so is her own."

"I see," Robert said. "I suppose if she's the one making the choice everything must be all right."

"Everything is as it should be," Zoë agreed with him before yawning.

"Why don't you sleep here tonight?" Robert told her. "We can sort everything else out in the morning."

"That would be pleasant," Zoë agreed. She quickly stretched out on his couch. Robert wheeled into the bedroom and found her a pillow and blanket. "Will you sit with me?" she asked.

"Of course," Robert said, taking one of her hands in his own.

"Thank you," she mumbled, falling to sleep almost instantly.

Robert looked at Zoë sleeping quietly on his couch. She seemed softer now, less sad. She had given him a beautiful gift all those years ago, but it was time he returned it to her.

Leaning over the small faerie, he softly kissed her on the lips. He felt the tingle, just as when she kissed him long ago. Robert leaned back and looked down at her. Her lips curled up into a smile and the soft glow he always associated with her returned to her cheeks. Satisfied, he wheeled over to his old club chair, transferred himself into it, and dozed off.

Robert didn't dream that night. In the morning when he awoke, all the fey beings he had grown accustomed to, all the beauty of the Shining Realms, was gone.

And so was Zoë.

* * *

"Nobody in the Court has seen her." Tara stood waist deep in the muddy river and gave her father the news.

"Is anyone looking for her?" Robert asked.

Tara gave him a grim look. "I've looked, and I've sought help where I could, but—" she shrugged.

"But you're about as popular in the Fair Realms as I am." Robert finished. When the Hob came to his apartment, agitated and demanding he follow it to the river, he knew something was seriously wrong. When Zoë first gifted him with the ability to perceive the Fair Realms, its denizens had been cold to him. Those few who did accept him tended to be the darker creatures, many of whom had aided Robert during his search for Zoë. In return for their aid, Robert repaid them by offering sanctuary in his apartment during times of trouble.

Robert looked at his daughter and sighed, "Tell me everything you know."

"She started to become withdrawn. It sometimes happens to elder fey. The weight of years settles about them and they disappear into themselves until they fade from existence. The others began to ignore her, and eventually her own kinsmen forced her to leave their family hall. I suppose they feared she'd gone melancholy and it might be catching. But mom isn't that old."

Tara pulled her shawl tighter over her bare body. “I’m afraid she managed to slip back into the mortal world.”

“And if she did, she might fade away forever,” Robert sighed. “You mother may not be old, but she has spent more years dwelling in mortality than is healthy.”

“Do you think you can find her?”

“I don’t know how I can, Tara. I returned her grace to her long ago. There’s nothing to lead me to her now.”

Tara bit her lower lip and sighed. “That’s not entirely true,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Before she returned home, Mom left a small piece of her grace with you. Mom told me that you would never be able to go completely back to a mundane existence without going mad, and that a little spark of her grace would always live inside you, no matter what happened to her.”

Robert had wondered at times. He could no longer see into faerie clearly, but he could sense the Fair Realm’s existence just beneath his own. And fey creatures still interacted with him, if they desired. “Okay then, I’ll search for her.”

“Thanks, Dad. You found her once before, so I thought you might be able to again.”

“I’ll try. I wish you would have come to me sooner.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t even know until last week.”

“Well, nothing to do about that now,” Robert said, rising with the aid of his canes. “Tara,” Robert looked into his child’s eyes, “you must realize eventually your mother and I will both be gone. I’m not young anymore. I’m crowding one hundred for all I seem barely retirement age. And your mother has seen too much of the mortal world. Her spirit is heavy with it. Someday it will become too much of a burden to bear.”

“I know,” Tara whispered, “but I want you both around as long as possible.”

“Well, I plan to keep living, at least for today.” Robert smiled at her. “One more thing, honey,” he began.

“Dad, don’t say it.” Tara warned, her eyes laughing.

“I really wish you’d put some clothes on.”

“I’m a naiad, Dad; we don’t wear clothes while we’re working. And these days I’m always working,” she finished.

“I can’t help it. I’m your father, and seeing you running around naked is just...just wrong.”

“Then I won’t tell you about all the other stuff I do,” she said impishly.

“Tara!” Robert said, scandalized. “I can’t believe my own flesh and blood would act so.”

She laughed before dissolving back into her river.

Robert gave the spot where she had stood moments before a last look, and with a shake of his head, turned back toward the shore. Now that he knew Zoë dwelled in the mortal realms, and that he still held a bit of her within him, he could feel her again. Robert boarded an aging hoverbus and rode the short distance to her.

He found Zoë sitting under the tallest tree in the park. Her pale skin glowed softly, and her hair was now long and the color of autumn leaves. She remained as beautiful as he remembered, but she seemed older.

“Hello, Zoë,” he said.

She looked up at him, eyes bright with unshed tears. “Robert, I never thought to see you again.”

He sat down on the bare earth beside her. He reached up and wiped a tear away from her

cheek. “Why the tears?”

“I dwelled too long in mortality. I am heavy with its sorrow. My family broke bonds with me. They say they do not know me as their daughter anymore. I no longer belong in either world.” She paused, looking up. “I...I cannot hear the songs of the trees.” Another tear, large and fat, rolled down her cheek.

As the tear left her cheek Robert reached out with his right hand and caught it. It lay in his palm, round and shimmering. He cupped it delicately. Though dimmed by sadness, the tear shone with the light of her being. Robert realized that the tiny piece of Zoë that he held made her incomplete.

“It’s time you remembered their tune again,” he said, leaning into her. He focused the last little bit of her grace within him, and wished it back to its original owner.

As the tingle passed between them, Zoë pulled away and placed one hand on his cheek. “Robert...”

He touched his fingers to her lips, silencing her. “I want to do this. I should have gotten that right the last time. If I had, you might never have come to this.”

She sighed and looked Robert over, frowning. “You have aged,” she said, dropping her hand.

Robert chuckled at her lack of tact. “Really? Most people say I don’t look a day over sixty. I think I’m in pretty good shape for someone who’s ninety-four years old.” He glanced down at her, “Yes, it seems time has restarted for me. At least the years didn’t rush up on me all at once.”

“Tara told me,” Zoë said.

“About?”

“Your wife.”

“I’m surprised. Tara never seemed happy about my decision to marry.” Robert stared into the distance.

“She cares deeply for you,” Zoë said. “I am sorry about your tragedy.”

“Thank you,” Robert said, still looking at something only he could see.

“I’m glad for you,” Zoë said suddenly. “I am glad you remembered your world holds a grace all its own.”

Robert didn’t speak for several moments, and when he did, his voice held great sadness. “Have you ever loved anyone, Zoë?”

“We do not love in the way you do,” she said. “Oh, we form bonds of love, deep and powerful, but you mortals, you love with your very souls.”

“I never thought I’d find anything to match the Fair Realms, but I was wrong.” Robert looked at Zoë. “The world is a darker place without her.”

“Yet you’ve found the will to live on.”

“For now. But everything ends eventually, Zoë.” Robert looked at the ground. “Everything dies.”

“But your end is not today,” Zoë whispered into his ear. She reached out and took his hand. “I will come live with you, if you desire it.”

Robert considered his next words carefully. “It doesn’t matter what I want, Zoë,” he said, though he wanted it very much. “Do *you* want to come with me?”

Zoë hung her head. “I cannot,” she finally admitted.

Robert smiled sadly. “I understand.” He looked at the small faerie. Zoë seemed brighter and more alive after just moments of holding her full grace; her hair was already changing to soft green. “Will you be able to find your own way home now?”

"Our daughter shall guide me. Once in the Fair Realms, I shall neither forget, nor fade."

"I'll come with you to the river to meet Tara."

Zoë smiled brightly at him, "That would be pleasant. It has been too long since we gathered as a family."

"Zoë, we've never gathered as a family."

"As I said, it has been too long."

She placed her hand inside his elbow. As one, they left the park, in search of a city hoverbus.

* * *

He sat in his antique wheelchair and remembered the smell of the morning dew on green grass and the sounds of crickets calling their mates. Most of all, he remembered the Shining Ones as they walked, stately and gracefully, among the oaks and elms. He smiled to himself. Time had finally caught up to him. At one hundred and twenty-seven years old, he knew death drew near.

"Hello, Robert," a familiar voice spoke next to him.

He smiled at her. "Zoë. I hoped to see you one more time." She looked as she did the first time he saw her at the bus stop, nearly one hundred years ago, right down to the black T-shirt and short purple hair. "I'm glad you came."

"Of course I came." Zoë knelt next to Robert and took his wrinkled hand in her tiny one.

"I know why you've come," Robert said, wheezing.

Zoë squeezed his hand. "Please, let me help you."

"No," he replied. "No, Zoë, it's my time. If I let you do this, it would be the end of you."

"I would be fine," she said. It pained Robert to hear the lie fall so easily from her lips.

"Tara told me," Robert said simply. "I know your life is failing. You've dwelled too long in mortality. It's killing you, Zoë; you must remain in the Fair Realms. You can't stay in this world anymore, and neither can I."

They sat in silence for several moments.

"I never mastered letting raindrops strike me," Zoë suddenly said.

Robert chuckled weakly. "I think I loved you even then, though I didn't know you."

"Robert..."

"I love you, Zoë. You know that, don't you?" His words came in gasps.

Zoë rose and leaned toward him. "I know, Robert. I have loved you also, for many years."

"I thought...your kind didn't...love...in the mortal sense," he said, struggling for breath.

She moved closer. "They do not."

Her lips touched his.

* * *

The procession to the river lasted three days. The line of Fey Ones, both the beautiful and the grotesque, extended for the length of a dozen tall trees. Where they passed, silence reigned. Small animals held their voices in deference. The leaves of the trees did not sway in the wind. Even the soft rain fell silently. When the procession passed too close to a mortal dwelling, all within were struck with an overwhelming sense of sadness and many burst spontaneously into tears, though they knew not why.

The slender Shining Ones, dressed in their mourning clothes, carried her in a manner befitting one who had tasted the most precious gift mortals could give. They dressed her in the finest clothing and laid her upon a litter of intricately carved oak, surrounded by spring flowers. Her kin understood, here at the last, that she had loved and been loved in return, in the manner of mortals, who loved with their very souls. They honored that love.

The Dark Ones carried him on a litter of rough elm and hummed a melancholy dirge. At his daughter's direction, he was dressed in his favorite shirt and jeans. About him lay boughs of pine and spruce. He had befriended many of their kind over the decades, and his daughter had taken one of their number as her consort. They considered him family, as broken and ugly as they with his stumps for legs, his two canes, and his time-ravaged face.

Tara stood waiting for them at the water's edge. She asked her river to bear them away to the next world, and he readily agreed, pleased to do this small thing for her.

The bearers placed the two litters into the waters, and bowing, stepped away. The current swept them up and carried them through the mist toward the south.

The rain fell, but only around them.

The End

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